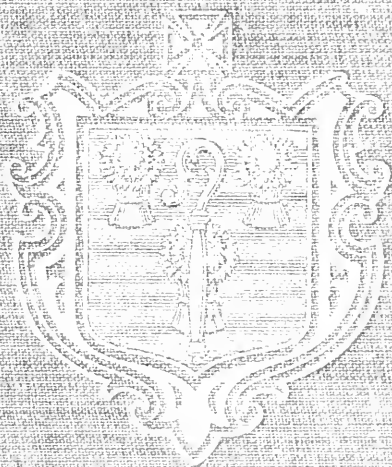


SPRING IN A SHROPSHIRE ABBEY



LADY C. MILES' CASKET

From Dear Clara

on my Birthday
April 23rd 1906

Edward

SPRING IN A SHROPSHIRE ABBEY





WENLOCK ABBEY IN 1778.

From an Engraving after a Drawing by Paul Sandby, R.A.

Frontispiece.

SPRING IN A SHROPSHIRE ABBEY

BY

LADY C. MILNES GASKELL

AUTHOR OF

"THE NEW CINDERELLA," AND "OLD SHROPSHIRE LIFE."

WITH EIGHTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS

LONDON

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1905

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*I dedicate this book to dear
Mrs. Boyle (E. V. B.), in affec-
tionate and grateful memory of
many charming talks that we
had together one sunny winter
in the far South.*



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SPRING IN A SHROPSHIRE ABBEY

CHAPTER I

JANUARY

Here, winter holds his unrejoicing court,
And through his airy hall the loud misrule
Of driving tempest is for ever heard.

THOMSON'S *Seasons*.

It was a dark, dismal day. Thick black clouds hung across the sky. There was a faint chirping of sparrows amongst the lifeless creepers, and that was all. A roaring fire burnt in my grate; before which my dog, a great tawny creature of the boarhound breed, lay sleeping at her ease. It was cold, very cold; in all nature there seemed no life. A white, thick covering rested upon the ground. Snow had fallen heavily the last week of the old year, and much, I feared, must fall again, judging by the yellowish grey, leaden pall I saw overhead.

I lay in bed; the doctor had just been, and had prescribed for me a day of rest, and a day in the house, on account of a chill caught the week before.

How immortal we should feel, I reflected, if it were not for influenza, colds, and rheumatism, and such like small deer amongst diseases. What a glory life would

be in their absence ! Alas ! we poor mortals, we spend much time in trivial illness ; not maladies of the heroic and grand mediæval school, such as the Black Death or the sweating sickness, but in weary, long episodes of chills, and colds, which make us feel ill, and low, and produce irritability and heart-searchings. It is sad also to think how many days slip by for all of us in the English winter—unloved and dreary days of twilight, and of little pleasure unless taken rightly and softened by letters to, and from old friends, and by hours spent with favourite books.

Yet each cloud has its silver lining, if we have but eyes to see ; and as an old cottager once said to me, “Yer might do worse than be in bed when Mother Shipton plucks her geese.” Yes, I reflected, I might be worse, and I looked round my Norman-windowed chamber—for to-day should be spent with my books.

Life to a woman, as has been justly said, is a series of interrupted sentences ; and in these days of hurry and scurry, life seems almost more interrupted than it did to our mothers twenty years ago, and leisure, of all delightful things, is the most delightful, the rarest and the most difficult to obtain. Leisure with thought is a necessity for mental development, and yet in these days of motor-driving, flying-machines, and radium we only think of getting on—getting on—but where ?

I lay back comfortably and looked with pleasure at the pile of books by my bedside. They were all dear, tried, and trusted friends. There was Malory. How I love his pictures of forest and castle, and his battles, while his last scenes of Launcelot and Arthur, are almost the greatest, and grandest that I know.

How pathetic they are ! and yet how simple, instinct with living poetry, and noble passion ! Then I saw my

much-worn Shakespeare, and I looked forward to a dip in *The Tempest*, and later on meant to refresh my mind with the story of the ill-fated Duke of Buckingham, who was betrayed near here by his treacherous steward, Banister. I looked round and saw other friends close to hand. Amiel's beautiful story of a noble life, teeming with highest thought; "Gerontius' Dream," by England's great poet and ecclesiastic; Tennyson's "Idylls of the King;" and a few of Montaigne's admirable essays, "that charming old man" of whom, Madame de Sévigné wrote, "it was impossible to weary, for, old friend as he was, he seemed always so fresh and new." I shall never be dull, I said with a laugh, and I shall live in fairy-land with my dogs and my poets. "You might do worse than lie in bed, as my old friend said," I repeated to myself; and I realized that even for days spent in bed there were compensations. Just as I was preparing to stretch out my arm and take a volume of Amiel, there came a loud knock at the door, and my daughter, a child of seven, ran in with the news—

"Oh, mama, here is a box of flowers for you, and they have come all the way from France; I know it, for Célestine said so."

"Flowers," I cried; "how delightful!" On hearing me speak, the big dog jumped up with a friendly growl, and insisted upon standing up with her forepaws on the bed and inspecting the flowers.

"See!" cried Bess, "carnations and roses. Now, why can't we always have carnations and roses? Miss Weldon says there is a time for everything; but I'm sure there's never half time enough for flowers and play."

"Perhaps not, Bess," I said. "But the snow and

the frost make us long for and love the flowers all the more, and if you did no lessons you wouldn't enjoy your playtime half as much as you do now."

Bess laughed contemptuously; she is a somewhat modern child, and has no time to look "ahead," as she calls it, nor any belief in the glories of adversity. Gravely she seated herself on my bed and enunciated the following sentences—

"Mama," she said in her clear bird-like voice, "I worry a little about something every day."

"No, not really, dear," I answered, rather horrified at this unusual display of gravity on her part. And I began to fear that there had been too many lessons of late, and had a terrible vision of over-pressure and undue precocity, as I took the little thing's hand and said, "Tell me, what is it?" Whereupon Bess replied solemnly, her eyes looking into space—

"I worry about something every day, and that is, wasting so much good time on lessons, when I might be quite happy, and do nothing but play."

"But, my dear," I began, "if it was all play, how would you ever learn to read or to write? And when you grew up and got quite big, you wouldn't like to be quite ignorant and to know nothing, would you?"

"I should know as much as I ought," replied Bess, sturdily.

"No, dear, you wouldn't," I said. "You couldn't talk as a lady, you wouldn't know any history or geography, or know how to speak French or German, or be able to read nice books, or do any of the things which are going to be very nice, but which perhaps are not very nice just at the beginning."

"I should know what Burbidge knows," replied Bess, stoutly; "besides which," she added, "dogs

don't know French, and no dates, and yet papa doesn't call them ignorant." And then my little maid turned with a scarlet face, and feeling perhaps a little worsted in the argument said, "Mama, let me scurry off for your maid."

A moment later Bess returned in company with Célestine, my French maid. Célestine entered like a whirlwind; she was sure that "*Madame se fatigue.*" "With one cold in de head un repos absolu is necessary," she declared. However, when she saw the flowers, and I explained that they came from "*la belle France,*" she affirmed "*que tout allait bien,*" and was mollified. She brought me water and some vases, and Bess and I proceeded to sort out the beautiful Neapolitan violets and snip the ends of the rose and carnation stalks. "I like cutting," cried Bess, eagerly. "It's doing something, Burbidge says," and just now the gardener is my little daughter's hero, and Burbidge's reasons for everything in her eyes rule the universe. I like to think of the poor stalks in water, I said; they are so thirsty, like poor tired men who have travelled over sandy deserts. Then I asked Célestine to hand me some water, and begged her to let it be tepid and to add a few drops of eau-de-Cologne in each glass.

"Madame will spoil the rose and the carnation, his own smell is all that is needed," answered my waiting-woman severely. But I begged her to comply with my request, for I wanted my dear friend's gifts to live in water as long as possible, and to revive quickly.

"Ah, they are charming," I said, as Célestine and Bess triumphantly arranged the vases around my bed. They placed a bowl of roses on Oliver Cromwell's cabinet, at least it was said to be his, a cabinet of rose and walnut wood which has innumerable secret drawers. What

papers, I wondered, have lain there? Perhaps State papers from Master Secretary Milton, poet and minister; ambitious, aspiring letters from his wife; tear-stained appeals from Royalists; pretty notes from his best beloved daughter, gentle Mistress Claypole. Who knows? And that day it held my little pieces of jewelry, my fans, odds and ends of ribbon, shoes, bows, and collars, and on it, filling the air with sweet perfume, rested a bowl of January roses. How fragrant they were, carrying with them all the breath of summer. Roses are the sweetest of all flowers—the triumph of summer suns, and summer rains, at least so they seemed to me. Those that I gazed on were a selection of exquisite teas: pink, fawn, copper, and creamy white, all the various tints of dying suns were represented, as they stood in an old Caughley bowl; and then I looked at the carnations and buried my nose in their sweet aromatic scent—some of these were of absolute pearl grey, and make me think of the doves of St. Mark when they circle or alight in the Piazza of the City of Lagoons.

“That’s a beauty,” said Bess, authoritatively. “Why it’s the colour of Smokey.” Smokey is the nursery Persian cat. “I did not know, mama,” continued Bess, “that flowers was grey—I thought they was always red, white, or blue. Burbidge would call that a dust-bin blow.”

“Flowers are all colours—at least gardeners make them so,” I answered.

“Ah, madame forgets,” interrupted Célestine, who with Gallic vivacity always likes her share of the conversation, “there are no blue roses.”

“You are right,” I answered, “there are no blue roses; they are only the flowers of our imaginations, but they never fade,” and I laughed. I spoke in French,

and this irritated Bess. Bess has a Shropshire nurse, Winifrede Milner, who has unfortunately an invincible objection to Célestine, in fact to foreigners of all kinds. It is a religion of hatred and objections, and creates continual disagreements in the household. Bess, owing to the nursery feud, sternly sets her face against everything foreign, and, above all, against speaking another tongue.

"I won't jabber like Célestine when she talks," she cried, "it sounds like shaking up a money-box, only no money comes out. Burbidge says 'foreigners are like sparrows when a cat's about. They talk when they've nothing to say, and go on when they've done.'"

"Oh, Bess, you must not be rude. If you were in France, you wouldn't like to hear rude things said about England, or English people."

"I shouldn't mind," replied Bess, sturdily, "because they wouldn't be true. When things aren't true, Miss Weldon says, you should rise above such considerations, and take no notice."

To divert the child I asked her abruptly what she was going to do. "You must go out, Bess," I said, "if the sun shines, and take poor Mouse." Mouse looked at me reproachfully as I spoke—she understood my reference to outdoor exercise, but hated the idea of wetting her feet, besides which she considered going out with any one except me beneath her dignity. Of all boarhounds that I have ever known, mine is the most self-indulgent and the most self-satisfied of my acquaintance. Besides which, secretly I felt convinced she was hopeful of sharing my meals, and lying later on the bed when no one was looking.

"Old Mouse is no good," retorted Bess, disdainfully. "She only follows grown-up people. If I lived in

heaven," she added dreamily, "I should have a real, live dog, that would walk with me, although I was only a child cherubim."

"Well," I pursued, "but what are you going to do?"

"Me?" inquired Bess, with small attention to grammatical niceties. "When I've done my lessons I shall go out with Burbidge. We are going to put up cocoa-nuts for tom-tits, and hang up some pieces of fat bacon for the starlings, besides which we are going to sweep round the sundial for the rooks. Papa said they were to be fed, and we are going to do it—Burbidge and me."

"What will Miss Weldon do?" I asked.

"Oh, she will read," with great contempt said Bess; "she reads, and never sees anything. Burbidge says that there are many who would know more if they read less."

"See after my canaries," I cried, as Bess flew off to finish her lessons, buoyed up with the hope later of going out with our old gardener. Outside I heard him, our faithful old retainer of some seventy years, tramping heavily on the red Ercal gravel. He was about to sweep a place by the sundial on which to feed my birds.

Birds of all kinds come to this outside dining-hall—tom-tits, the beautiful little blue and green variety, perky and no larger than a wren; wrens with deep guttural bell-like notes and brown tails up-tilted; robins with flaming breasts; ill-bred, iridescent, chattering starlings; a few salmon-breasted chaffinches, the tamest of all wild birds; spotted thrushes, and raven-hued blackbirds; besides an army of grey sparrows, very tame, very cheeky, and very quarrelsome. Added to all

these were the rooks, and a flight of grey-pated hungry jackdaws who uttered short sharp cries when they saw the corn and scraps of bread, but who dared not approach as near as the other and smaller birds.

Across my latticed windows dark shadows passed and repassed; they were caused by the jackdaws and the rooks who swept down at intervals, and carried off a big piece of bread when nobody was at hand. The old gardener fed this strange feathered crew, and then stood aside to see the fun. How the starlings jabbered and screamed, and what an ill-bred, ill-conditioned lot they were, as they all talked at once, screamed, scolded—vulgar, loud, noisy, common, and essentially of low origin.

A few of the Watch Tower pigeons swept down with a flutter of musical wings, and were about to fall upon the food, when crowds of jackdaws left the old stone tiled roof and dashed in for their share, uttering as they went their weird ghostly cry. For a moment the noise was chaotic—the pigeons cooed and strutted, the starlings screamed, and the jackdaws pressed greedily forward to seize and carry off all they could get. Suddenly there was a noise, hungry, passionate, furious, like an angry motor pressing forward in a race and bent on dealing death on all sides; and I saw the peacock dash forward, his tail up, and his neck outstretched. He fell upon the food and would allow none to partake of any, till he had had his fill. Behind him followed his three wives, but at a respectful distance; he was not gallant like a barndoor cock, in fact he was much too fine a fellow to think of any one but himself. His tail feathers were not yet quite perfect, and they seemed swathed in places in silver paper, but his neck was glorious, of a brilliant blue with shimmers of golden reflections, and

of a colour that has no equal. He had a viperish head, and was gloriously beautiful, and morally, a collection of all the vices—greedy, spiteful, and furiously ill-tempered. He slew, last spring, a whole clutch of young “widdies,” as the country people call ducklings, and killed, in a fit of anger, two of his own chicks. Burbidge dislikes him on account of the damage he does in a garden, but respects him for his beauty.

“He is like an army of ‘blows’” (blossoms), he says, “and creates more damage than a tempest at harvest time, does old Adam.”

Mouse, whilst I was watching the scene outside through the long lancet window, seized upon her opportunity and leapt up upon the bed.

“I wish you wouldn’t,” I said feebly. “I am sure the fire was nice enough, even for a dog.” But Mouse thought differently; she turned round in a distracting, disagreeable way, some three or four times, as wild dogs are said to do in the prairies, on the bed—my bed, and then flumped down heavily across my feet. I wriggled uneasily, but Mouse had gained her point and had no feelings for my discomfort; she rested upon the bed, which to every well-constituted dog-mind is a great achievement, almost an acknowledgment of sovereignty. There she would lie, I knew, until some divertisement could be suggested that would appeal to her palate, or some suggestion of danger outside. For Mouse is greedy and lazy, but faithful as most dogs are, and few human beings. I dared not slap or speak rudely, for great Danes are gifted with acute sensibilities; and if I were to be so ill-judged as to express displeasure by an unpleasant gesture, she would remain broken-hearted and aggrieved for the rest of the day.

Alas! for the liberty of the subject. I groaned for

folks who indulge their dogs in caprice and greed, but I had not the courage to fight for myself and so had to suffer. There is really much to be urged in favour of the fortunate people who are dog-less.

I turned my head and looked with delight at my flowers. While I gazed, my mind flew back, and away to the land of sunshine from whence they came. I thought of sunny Mentone with its blue sky, and glittering groves of oranges and lemons that hung in the sunlight like balls of fire and light; of Cap St. Martin stretching seaward, and, above all, of the beautiful garden of La Mortola that I visited several times when I stayed at the Bellevue. How wonderfully exquisite that garden was, running down to the turquoise sea, a perfect fairy-land of delight—the old villa, once a mediæval palace, in the centre, with its well, with its marble floors, its cypress groves and fir pines, its sheets of brilliant anemones, its agaves and aloes, and its cacti.

It made me think of the garden of Eden before the Fall, that garden of La Mortola—it seemed hardly a real place, so beautiful was it; and its thirty maidens that weeded the paths and watered the blossoms, seemed scarcely more real.

How well I remembered walking round the garden, with the kind and courteous owner of this land of enchantment; how he showed us all his rare and strange plants, plants from all parts of the world, old and new. There were many varieties of oranges and lemons, and the air, as we walked in the golden light of a March day, was laden with the entrancing sweetness of the *Pittosporum*. But above all, what interested me most in the Enchanted Land was the old Roman road, which runs just above the kitchen garden, and below the flower garden. Here, it is recorded on a tablet let into the wall, is the place

where Napoleon and his victorious army passed into Italy. It is a narrow little path on which the whole of the French army passed, with scarcely room for two men to ride abreast. Below lay the sea like a lake, of that wonderful delicate blue that is only to be seen in Mediterranean waters, tideless and brilliant, and beyond were the purple coasts of Corsica.

I remembered at the end of my first visit my kind host asking me amongst his rare and beautiful flowers, what I had most admired? I replied, the sheets of violets, but violets as it is impossible to imagine in chilly England, sheets of purple, unhidden by leaves, and gorgeous in their amethystine glory—violets growing in great beds many yards long in the middle of the garden, like mantles of purple. They were a glorious vision, a sight of beauty that I shall never forget, a revelation of colour. As I looked at the bunches that my friend had sent, I thought of those exquisite perfumed *parterres*, of the song of the blackcaps amongst the olives, of the golden sunlight, and of the radiant beauty of sea and sky. Yes, the garden of La Mortola was wonderfully, marvellously beautiful, and it even then seemed to me doubly beautiful, seeing it as I did in my mental vision, across sheets of snow and in the grim atmosphere of an English winter.

What a true joy beautiful memories are! the real jewels of the soul that no robber can steal, and that no moth or rust can corrupt, the great education of sense and heart. Then I took my books and enjoyed a browse. What a good thing leisure is, leisure to read and think. Nobody interrupted me, only the chimes of the old parish church told me the hour from time to time.

With measured cadence, drowsily and melodiously

they sounded across the snow-bound earth. "Time to dream, time to dream," they seemed to say.

Later on came my luncheon, cutlets with onion chips and jelly. Mouse got the bones. She was polite enough to leap off the bed and to crack them on the floor—and I was grateful for small mercies. A minute afterwards, and I rang my hand-bell, and Célestine scurried down.

"Madame a froid, madame est malade," and in her impetuous Gallic way, waited for no reply. However, when I could make myself heard, I told her that I meant to get up, as my friend was coming down from the Red House to embroider with me.

When my toilet was completed, I begged Célestine to bring my big basket from the chapel hall below, and the curtain that I was engaged in embroidering for my oratory. The background is of yellow linen and is thickly covered with fourteenth and fifteenth century birds, beasts, and flowers, and in the centre of each there is an angel.

Each curtain is three yards four inches, by two yards four inches. The birds, beasts, and flowers are all finely shaded and are worked in crewels, tapestry wools divided, in darning and fine Berlin wools, and all these various sorts seem to harmonize and mingle wonderfully well together.

The picture, for it really is a picture, was drawn out for me by a very skilful draughtsman. The birds, beasts, and angels have been taken from old Italian work, from mediæval stained-glass windows, and from old missals, and then drawn out to scale. There are Tudor roses, Italian carnations, sprays of shadowy love-in-the-mist, dusky wallflowers, and delightful half-heraldic birds and beasts, running up and hanging down

the stems. It is a great work. Constance, who is good enough to admire it, says that she is sure that the Water-poet would have said, if he could have seen it—

“Flowers, plants and fishes, beasts, birds, flies and bees,
Hills, dales, plains, pastures, skies, seas, rivers, trees :
There’s nothing near at hand or farthest sought
But with the needle may be shaped and wrought.
Moreover, posies rare and anagrams,
Art’s life included, within Nature’s bounds.”

There are four curtains to do, and alas, I have only one pair of hands !

I keep all carefully covered up with old damask napkins as I go along, so that neither ground nor work can get rubbed or soiled, and embroider, myself, in what my old housekeeper calls pie-crust sleeves, to save the slightest friction from my dress on the yellow linen.

As to the cherubim’s and seraphim’s wings, they have been my great and constant delight. I dreamt of a wild glory of colour which I hardly dared to realize, but of which I found wonderful examples one sunny day in the macaw grove at the Zoo. I went up and down and inspected the marvellous birds for an hour, drinking in with rapture the extraordinary richness of their plumage. How marvellous they were ! Red, blue, mauve, green, scarlet, rose, and yellow, all pure unsullied colours, and like flashes of light. They seemed to me like a triumphant tune set to pealing chords. There seemed in those glorious creatures to be no drawbacks, no shadows, no trivialities of daily life. In their resplendent feathers they appeared to gather light and to reproduce the majesty of the sun itself.

I went home, my eyes almost dazzled with their radiancy, and a week after attempted to work into my

curtain something of what I had seen—a feeble reflection, I fear, but still a reflection. In my angels and cherubim I have allowed no greys or browns, no twilight shades. Everywhere I have introduced a pure warm note of intense joyous colour, and if I have not always succeeded, at least the wings of my celestial beings have been a great source of delight to imagine, and to execute. In my colouring it has been always morning. Bess was charmed to run and fetch me the different wools needed—“Summer suns,” she called them.

I have often noticed that to a young child, pure brilliant colours are an intense joy and a source of gaiety. It is only as the shades of the prison-house draw near, and press upon us, that the lack of appreciation creeps in for what to children and to primitive man is a great and constant glory. That day I was going to embroider some anemones, such as I remembered in the old market-place of Mentone, and a sprig of stocks, such as I recollected once having seen on a drive to Brigg. The eye of the mind can be a great pleasure if properly cultivated. It may not be actually correct, but it can give the soul and the life of things remembered, even through the mist of years.

And now one word, dear sister-devotees of the needle, about embroidery. Do not imagine that shading in five or six shades of the same colour, which is the way that nine people out of ten work, is the true and natural one. This only produces a sad and wooden flower, without life or gladness, and conceived and worked amongst the shades of twilight. Take any flower and place it in the sunlight, and you will see in any purple flower, for instance, that there are not only different shades, but different colours—red, mauve,

blue, lavender, and violet. I realized as I gazed at my anemone, that it must be embroidered in greyish lavenders, with here and there pure notes of violet with heather tints, in red purples, in greyish whites, and with a vivid apple-green centre. All these were strikingly different colours, but were necessary in the shading to make my blossom look as if it had grown amidst sunlight and shower.

I stood my bunch of real flowers in water in as strong a light as possible; as to the sunshine, alas! of that there was but a scanty supply, and I had to imagine that mostly, as also the scent of the orange groves and the thrilling song of the blackcaps overhead, for in our northern world, let it be written with sorrow, many and long are the dull leaden months between each summer. Still light did something, and imagination did the rest. I imagined myself back under the brilliant sky of southern France, and I thought I saw the bowls of brilliant flowers as I had known them, whilst I threaded my needle.

Suddenly Mouse slipped off the bed, and whined at the door. I understood her anxiety to run out, for I, too, had heard a tramp on the gravel path outside, and had seen the keeper Gregson go off towards the back-door laden with a string of rabbits, a plover or two, and a brace of partridges neatly fastened to a stick, as is the way of keepers.

The black retriever that was following Gregson is a dear friend of Mouse's. Once my dog went out shooting. In the cells of her brain that day has always remained a red letter day; I believe on this celebrated occasion she ran in, and did all that a sporting dog should not do, knocked down a beater who was endeavouring to lead "the great beast," fought a yellow

retriever, but did find and successfully bring back, puffing and panting like a grampus, a wounded bird that had escaped keepers, beaters, and trained dogs.

"Her's like a great colt in the plough, but her has a beautiful nose," Gregson always declared, "and if so be her had been brought up proper, would have been an ornament to her profession."

The memory of this "jour de gloire," as Célestine called it, had never left my canine friend, and my gigantic watch-dog had ever since retained a devouring passion for field sports. To humour my dog, I opened the door, and Mouse disappeared, and swept by like a hurricane, ponderous and terrible, down the newel staircase heaving and whining with impatience. A second later and I saw her below greeting Gregson effusively.

Our old keeper was pleased at her welcome. "Good Mouse," I heard him call. And then I heard him cry out to our French cook, Auguste, "Mouse, she seems like a bobby off duty when she finds me. There's nature in the dog for all her lives in the drawing-room, lies on sofas and feeds on kickshaws." Auguste agreed, and then seeing the game, gesticulated and exclaimed, "Quelle chasse! C'est splendide, et vous——" A moment later I heard the door close, and Gregson disappeared into the old Abbey kitchen to smoke, doubtless, the pipe of peace, after partaking liberally of a certain game pie, that we had the day before at luncheon.

The voices grew faint, and I returned to my work. I threaded several needles with different colours, pricked them handy for use in a pincushion, and then began to copy my flowers on the table as deftly as I could, and awaited my friend.

It was very peaceful outside. All looked grey and

cold, the snow lay white and pure, and the only note of colour was the glistening ivy. There was no sound, the starlings had vanished. Far away I saw a flock of rooks, dim specks against the leaden sky. I sat and embroidered in silence, when suddenly the calm of the winter afternoon was broken by the gay laughter of a child, and I discerned my Bess, chattering below with our old gardener Burbidge.

In one hand he carried a pole, whilst Bess had tightly clutched hold of the other. I opened my lattice window and inquired what they were about to do?

The reply came back from Burbidge that he and the gardeners were going to shake off the snow from the great yew hedge by the bowling-green. "The snow be like lead to my balls," said the old man, "and as to the peacock's tail, I fear it will damage the poor bird unless it be knocked off dang-swang"—which is Burbidge's Shropshire way of saying "at once."

Burbidge always speaks of the yew peacock as the real bird, and of Adam, our blue-necked pet, as "him that plagues us in the garden."

Bess laughed with joy at the thought of so congenial an occupation.

"I shall help too," she cried, as she waved her hand to me, "for Ben" (the odd man) "has cut me a stick, and I am going to knock as well as anybody. I have done all my lessons, mamsie," she bawled. "I know enough for one day, and now I'm going to work, really work."

I kissed my hand, and Bess passed off the scene accompanied by a train of gardeners.

Just before Bess was quite out of sight Célestine poked out her head from a top window above, and



Photo by Pyth.

THE ABBEY FARMERY.

I heard her raise her voice to scold angrily but ineffectually. Célestine has an unfortunate habit of giving unasked, her advice freely. Like a cat, she has a horror of getting wet, and has a rooted belief that *une petite fille bien élevée* should remain in, in bad weather, nurse her doll by the fire, or learn to make her dolly's clothes. I did not catch all that my maid said, but some of her stray words of indignation reached me. I heard that something was not *gentil*, and something else was *infâme*, and Bess in particular "*une petite fille impolie*." In answer to this I caught a defiant laugh from Bess, and then Célestine banged down her window above.

I sat down and worked in silence. Bess is an only child—and will come to no harm under old Burbidge's care, I said to myself. In fact, she will learn under his tutorship many of the delightful things that make life worth having afterwards. She will so acquire the knowledge of the things that are seen, and not learnt by book; she will get to know the different notes of the birds, and to distinguish their eggs. She will hear from him the names of the hedge-row flowers, and learn where to find the rare ones, and know by country names all the sweet natural things that enable us to appreciate a long walk in the country, or a turn round our gardens. She will thus unconsciously learn to love simple wild things, and homely pleasures, and these will be for her stepping-stones to the higher education in the future.

Why is the society of old servants so delightful to children? I asked myself this question, as I asked it also of my little maid, a few weeks before, when she gave me her definition of a happy day—a day to be spent, if I remember rightly, in the company of Burbidge

with Ben the odd boy, and in driving with Crawley, the Yorkshire coachman.

"I should like to be swung by Ben from the old walnut tree, to garden, and catch tadpoles with Bur-bidge, and to drive the old grey mare all by myself with Crawley." And Bess added: "Then, mamsie, I should be quite happy; and mummie, do let it come true on my first holiday, or on my next birthday." "If there could be no 'don'ts,'" another time Bess told me, "I should be always good; and if I had no nurse, or governess, I should never be naughty." I try to implant in Bess's mind that nurse and governess are her duties in life. She agrees but sadly, and like most modern people, poor child, wishes to get rid of life's duties as quickly as possible. "I never mean to be naughty," Bess asserts, "but naughtiness comes to me like spoiling a frock, when I least expect it." And she once added, "I know, mummy, if people didn't think me naughty I never should be."

I pondered over these nursery problems as the work grew under my hands. How delicate and exquisite were all the shades of grey and lavender in the real flowers. I inspected my threaded needles, but I could not find amongst my crewels the necessary tints. I took a thread of tapestry wool, divided it carefully, and then turning to a box of Scotch fingering on cards, found exactly what was needed, a warm shade of heather. Embroidery is so much to me. It is part of my life, and flowers and birds when done recall thoughts and joys and pains, as scents are said to bring back the past to most people. A story is told of a French lady who, when they told her that her daughter-in-law did not like needlework, replied, "She is very young—she has never known real sorrow."

All of a sudden I dropped my work and started up, for all the dogs had begun to bark in chorus. I ran to the window. I heard the crunch of the gravel, and a minute later I saw a carriage drawn by a pair of greys stop before our old front door.

Out of the brougham there emerged the little figure of Harry, Colonel Stanley's only little boy and Bess's playmate. He was accompanied by his German governess, a fat, phlegmatic personage, Fräulein Schliemann by name. As she got out, I heard her say, "I have one letter to leave, most important," and she stood waiting on the doorstep for Fremantle to show her into the house. In the selfsame moment, Harry, hearing voices in the rose garden, without a word, and nimble as a rabbit, darted through the wrought-iron gates and waved his hand to Bess. In a second Bess appeared, a shower of snow upon her cap and amongst her locks, but redolent of health, and full of gaiety. "Is that you, Hals?" she cried, and the children dashed off to the end of the garden together.

Fräulein in the mean time discoursed with Fremantle and gave up her letter. All this I noticed from my room. Through my window I heard peals of laughter, and I saw Hals on the back of an under-gardener, pursued by Bess, who was engaged in throwing handfuls of snow at him.

Happily this spectacle was not witnessed by Fräulein Schliemann, for water and snow are always repellent to her, and incomprehensible as sources of pleasure or amusement. She heaved a big sigh and then, preceded by the butler, went into the old chapel hall and plumped her fat self down on an old oak chair. A quick knock at my door, and Fremantle brought me the letter. The note contained an invitation for Bess to go over and

spend the following Saturday afternoon at Hawkmoor, Colonel Stanley's country house, some six miles away. It would be little Harry's birthday, I was told, and the diversions and amusements in his honour, were to be great, and varied.

Punch and Judy in the front hall, a conjuror, a magic-lantern, and later on a birthday cake, with lighted candles, as many as the years that little Hals (as Bess calls him) would have attained to.

"Do," wrote my cousin, Venetia Stanley, "let little Bess be at Harry's eighth birthday. I often feel my little lad is very lonely, and Bess's presence would make his birthday a double joy."

In a moment I had scribbled back an answer. Of course Bess must go, I wrote. Harry was a dear little boy, and being entertained and the art of entertaining are parts of the higher and necessary education of children. I carried down my note myself, and assured Fräulein of my delight in accepting so charming an invitation for my little girl.

Fräulein simpered, and I called for tea. At the Abbey there are no bells on the ground floor. Then I remembered the children, and turned to Fräulein and asked her if she knew where they were.

"Heinrich is with Bess," I was told. About a quarter of an hour later, when a hissing urn was brought in, I begged Fremantle to ring my hand-bell, as a signal to the loiterers that tea was ready.

For some time this summons received no answer, but at last, breathless but blissful, the children appeared. But in what a plight! Heinrich's deep red velvet suit was soaked and sadly soiled, and his cap and long flaxen curls dripped with moisture, whilst Bess's garments were running with mud and wet, and as they

.

both stood in the chapel hall, little pools of water guttered down beside them.

Fräulein started up and screamed hysterically, and I darted forward. "My dears, how wet you are," I cried. "You must go and change at once." And without another word I hurried off both children to the nursery. It was an easy matter to put Bess into a fresh dry frock and into a clean white pinafore, but what could be done with Harry? I asked myself. He is a delicate child, and must not remain in damp clothes, so I turned to him resolutely, and asked, "Which will you do, Harry: get into one of Bess' dresses, or go to bed?"

"Oh, auntie," he answered, blushing furiously, for he always calls me "auntie," although I am not his real aunt, "I would much rather go to bed than wear a girl's dress."

So we were about to put him into bed when a sudden brilliant idea flashed through my brain. "My husband's dressing-gown," I murmured. In a moment, kindly Fremantle, who heard me, had fetched it. It was yards too long, but it was turned up with an army of safety-pins, and so Hals' vanity was not humiliated. At least he was clothed in male attire! And we must always remember that self-respect in a little lad is even more easily wounded than love.

Five minutes later both children were dry, and clad in other costumes. "I don't think that they will be any the worse," I said to my old nurse, Milner. But as I entered the chapel hall I noticed that Fräulein looked as black as thunder. In her eyes the episode was a most disagreeable, even a disgraceful occurrence.

Hals paused on the threshold for a moment and looked at me beseechingly out of his pretty, round, short-sighted eyes.

"I am so sorry," I said apologetically, and felt really for a second a transitory shame, Fräulein looked so fierce and injured. "How did it happen?" I asked of Bess, by way of lifting the leaden pall of silence.

"Only a rat hunt," answered that young lady, jauntily, with her mouth full of buttered toast, for she had not waited for grace, but had slipped into her seat at the head of the tea-table. "There was a rat," she continued to explain, "in the potting-shed, and Trump and Tartar smelt him out and ran after him, and Hals joined in and tumbled over. He shouldn't wear smart clothes when he comes here. Nobody wants him to. Gregson says, 'By gum, give me the varminty sort,'" and Bess laughed rather rudely, after which there was an awkward and prolonged pause.

"Hals is your guest," at last I said severely; upon which Bess turned scarlet, and a second later plied Hals with seed and sponge cake at once.

I had the velvet suit taken to the kitchen fire to dry, but I must honestly confess that its magnificence was, I feared, a thing of the past. While we sat on, Fremantle entered, and in his most irreproachable voice informed us that Mrs. Langdale (the housekeeper) was of opinion that Master Harry's suit would not be fit for him to wear again that day. At this Fräulein wrung her hands and broke out into ejaculations. "Mein Gott! mein Gott!" she cried, and began to scold Harry furiously.

At this, Bess could keep down her wrath no longer. With flashing eyes she confronted Hals' governess. "It was my fault, all my fault," she said. "I told Hals to run like mad, and not to miss the fun."

Fräulein did not deign to answer Bess' justification of her pupil, but glared at Hals; and we all remained on in silence, and I noted that poor little Hals had a

white face, and that both slices of cake on his plate remained untouched.

"I will write and explain all to Mrs. Stanley," I said at last; "only," and here I turned to Harry, "you must go back in the dressing-gown, dear, and be wrapped up warmly in a rug. No colds must be caught, and the suit shall be sent back to-morrow."

Hals nodded his head. Whatever happened he was not going to cry; only girls and muffs cried, but he knew that there was a bad time coming, when he would have to face the music.

Bess watched his face. She was up in arms. Directly after grace was said, and this time by her in a jiffy, she flung herself off her chair, flew upstairs defiant, and breathless. A minute later she reappeared, her face crimson, but her mouth set.

"How much?" she asked of Fräulein, in a hostile spirit. "How much? I say, if I *pay*, you mayn't punish."

But here Hals dashed forward, and would not let Bess put her purse into his governess's hand. "Don't," he said; "boys can't take money from girls." And Bess was left stammering and confused, with her own sky-blue purse left in her little fat paw. I pretended not to see what had happened as I sat down and wrote a note to my friend, Venetia Stanley, to explain all, and to beg forgiveness for the little culprit. I pleaded that tumbles, like accidents, would happen in the best regulated nurseries. I addressed my letter, and stuck down the envelope. This done, we all sat on in sombre silence round the fire. All conversation died upon our lips, Fräulein looked so sour and forbidding.

At last our gloomy interview was broken up by Fremantle entering the room and announcing the fact

that Colonel Stanley's carriage was at the door, and a message from the coachman to the effect that he hoped the greys would not be kept waiting.

Then without more ado, Fremantle lifted Hals in his arms, for the dressing-gown was too long to permit the little boy to walk, and Tom, the footman, followed with a thick fur rug to wrap round him. "Give Master Hals my note," I called, as the little party vanished through the outside door.

Fräulein went last, an evil glare on her fat face, and "as dark as tempest," Burbidge would have said if he had seen her, and I noted that she would not take my hand at parting. She evidently thought the disaster that had befallen the red suit was due to me. I was *wae* for the little man, as he vanished from my sight; that stupid German woman had no more sympathy with the young life that throbbed and beat in him, than if she were a table or a chair, and he would certainly have what the French call a bad quarter of an hour with her before she had done.

Bess stood for a minute or two after they were gone, and we looked blankly at each other. Bess cried, "Beast, beast!" and then burst into floods of tears. "She will punish him," she moaned, "she will punish him," and she buried her face amongst the sofa cushions of the great settee.

At first I felt powerless to soothe her, or to induce her to take a less gloomy view of the situation. "It is unfair and mean of the old Fräulein," she kept on calling out, "for I did offer to pay on the nail" (Bess has acquired a considerable amount of slang); "and I offered her all the money I had. Five shillings that came at Christmas, half a crown from Uncle St. John, and six-pence which I won in good marks from Miss Weldon."

Bess was of opinion that so magnificent a sum was enough for a king's ransom, and ought to have bought all, or any attires, and to have silenced all voices of reproof.

I did not undeceive my little maid. After all, it was all her earthly wealth, and all that she possessed she had offered to save her little friend from punishment. Later on darkness fell, Fremantle appeared with a lamp, and Bess fetched her work, a kettle on a vermilion ground of cross-stitch, which I have often been told "will be so useful to papa on his birthday;" and I started reading aloud, for Bess's edification, one of Hans Andersen's beautiful stories.

As I closed the book, Bess exclaimed, "It is not true, but it is better than true — beautiful stories always are—and there, at least, is no horrid German governess. If I chose," my little girl said, "I should only have a Yorkshire, or a Shropshire governess. Burbidge says there's many wise folks as cannot understand foreigners; and Crawley says, 'Give me plain Yorkshire, and I'll knock sense into any one's head.'" Then we discussed the story. I had read the tale of the Ugly Duckling, perhaps the most beautiful story of all fairy-land. Bess listened open-mouthed, and her eyes glistened like stars with joy at the end. "I shall always think a swan is a fairy prince," she murmured. "Why don't beautiful things happen much oftener? Only lessons, nursery tea, stains, and mistakes come every day." As she spoke, the old church clock struck seven, and Bess put away her work in a little crimson bag.

I sat before the great open fireplace and listened to my little girl's talk. Through the latticed windows of the oratory shone a soft mist of stars.

"Sometimes beautiful things really happen," I said;

and then through the open door I saw old Nana standing. A hurried kiss from Bess, and the child was gone.

Later on, in the evening, after dinner, I mounted the old newel staircase and made my way to the old nursery up in the roof with its latticed dormer windows. There, to my surprise, I found Bess wide awake.

"I have told Miss Bess not to talk no more," said Nana, rather sourly; "but she will run on about Master Harry and his German punishments."

My old body's sympathy for once was with Fräulein, for spoiling a vest and a velvet suit can never be otherwise than a crime in any nurse's eyes.

I went and sat by my little maid's white dimity hung cot.

"I think he will be forgiven," I said.

"P'raps he'll turn into a fairy prince," said Bess, and she took my hand, "and then it will all come right." In a few moments I saw that she was getting drowsy, for she looked at me with half-closed eyes—one eye tinnin' and the other carrin' trout, as Shropshire folks say when you are overcome with sleep. Then Bess went on in the sing-song voice that so often immediately precedes sleep with children, "Hals was an ugly duck to-day, but he'll turn into a swan or something nice some day."

"Some day," I nodded.

"Yes, when Hals' birthday comes." And Bess's eyes closed gently, and she slipped away into the blessed land of dreams.

When I went downstairs I found a letter from my friend Constance of the Red House, to tell me that at the last moment she was detained by a visit from a poor old body whose son was ill, and so couldn't come down to

tea ; but that she trusted on the morrow to find me, what Bess calls, " quite better."

The following day fresh snow fell. All nature lay covered up with what Burbidge calls " a fine hoodin'." Before my eyes a pure white dazzling plain of snow extended, and even the old stone roof and the ruined church glistened white and wonderful. As soon as I was called, I opened my window and saw my tame robin, who one summer was hatched in a yew hedge, appear on my window-sill. Billy Fire-Dew, Bess has christened him, and Billy Buttons he is known as, by Burbidge and the gardeners. He has a brilliant flame-coloured breast, soft rich brown wings, and large round liquid eyes. For a minute he rested upon the window, then with a joyous chirp he spread his wings and hopped upon a great Spanish chestnut sixteenth-century chest, which stands in the centre of my bedroom. On the chest are figures of gods and goddesses, burnt in by an iron.

Happily I was not unprovided with suitable refreshment to offer my little guest. A scrap of sponge cake in a wine glass, saved from last night's dinner, met with his entire approval. It had been intended for Mouse, but as at the last moment she could not be found, so Bill was in luck. I sprinkled some crumbs about the chest, and on my writing-table, and he hopped about puffing himself out, quite unabashed, and partook freely of the breakfast I offered him. I did not move as I watched him, but remained standing stock-still. I have always found one of the great secrets of bird taming is to keep immovable, till all sense of fear is lost by constant familiarity.

How beautiful he was, with his great hazel eyes, and his scarlet waistcoat beneath his sober hood.

He chirped loudly as he ate, and then flew joyfully

from table to bed, and from bed to table, and so at last back to the window-sill, uttering at moments his clear bell-like cry. Whilst I was engaged in watching my little feathered friend, I heard the click of the latch of my door, and Bess entered bearing in her arms the nursery cat Grey Smokey.

"Oh, beware!" I cried alarmed. "Billy Fire-Dew is here." In an instant Bess had opened the door again and evicted her favourite, but not without noise; and Bill had caught fright, and with a loud shrill cry, had flown into the garden.

Then, outside the door, Smokey began to mew piteously. "Let her in," I said, "she can do no harm now. Bill is quite safe." So the puss entered, and although habitually the gentlest of creatures, I saw that the instinct of an animal of prey was strong within her.

For Smokey paced up and down my room; her eyes shone like topazes in the sunlight, and as she walked, she lashed her tail like a lioness at the Zoo.

"She'd kill poor Bill if she could get him," I said.

"Yes," answered Bess, "and eat him up, without pepper and salt. Cats are never really kind, not right through, for all their purring."

Then Bess asked me what I meant to do, now that I was well again. "Papa," she said, "told me that I might go sledging some day; but this morning you must take me and show me where St. Milburgha was buried, and tell me also about the old monks. Do you know, mama, I often think of the monks in bed. Last night—I don't remember all, but there was something that happened with a man in a black gown, and Hals did something as a swan—I rather disremember," continued my

little maid, with *naïveté*, "for I fell asleep before I could rightly recollect. But Burbidge perhaps will tell me; he knows a lot about monks. It is fine, as Nana says, to be such a scholar."

"Ah! now I remember," said Bess, after a pause. "Burbidge declares that they walled up Christians, the monks, and drank out of golden cups, and hunted the deer."

I was amused at Burbidge's views—they were obviously those of the very primitive Protestant.

"Come into the garden this morning, child, and I will tell you a little about the monks."

A few hours later I called "Bess!" from the gravel below. "Are you ready?" Then I heard a buzz of excited voices from the nursery, and a great fight, going on over the winding round of a comforter, and Bess leapt down two stairs at a time and joined me in the garden.

I had my snowshoes on, so I had no sense of cold, and round my shoulders heavy furs. Mouse sported before us rather like a benevolent luggage train, whilst the two terriers, Tramp and Tartar, cut capers, barked, and sniffed and frisked. These hunted in the bushes, darted in and out, and sought for rabbits under every stone and tree. They yelped and put their noses frantically into holes and corners. Whether the rabbits were real or imaginary it was impossible to say.

Bright sunshine fell upon the old red sandstone of which the later part of the old Abbey Farmery is built, and cast an opalescent glare on the snow-covered roof. The old yew hedges stood forth like banks of verdant statuary, in places where the snow had melted, and on the top of a stone ball stood the blue-necked peacock.

The day was deliciously crisp, clear, and invigorating,

and Bess, as she ran along, laughed and snowballed me and the dogs, and so we wandered away into the cloisters.

"Tell me about it all," said Bess at last, confidentially, after a time of breathless frolicking with the dogs. "Miss Weldon talks so much that I can never understand her."

Then I told Bess in a few simple words about the cloisters. "There was, first of all, dear," I said, "a party of Saxon ladies who lived at the abbey, and the most beautiful was Milburgha, their abbess. She came here to avoid a wicked Welsh prince, and she rode a beautiful milk-white steed. And she was very holy."

"I should be holy, if I rode a milk-white steed," said Bess, impulsively, "I am sure I should."

And then I added rather irrelevantly, "St. Milburgha kept geese."

"Saints and princesses always do," answered Bess, authoritatively. "I know what they did, they combed their hair with golden combs, and talked to emperors in back gardens. Then they always had flocks of goats or geese. I don't think they could get on without that, mama," said my little maid, with a gasp. "It must be very amusing," she continued, "to be a saint or a princess and have a crown. They have them in Bible picture-books. Anyway, they never have any lessons or governesses, hardly mamas, and they only talk to the animals."

"But, my little girl," I urged, "saints have to be *very* good; and then you must remember, Bess, that princesses in all the stories have to accomplish terrible tasks, and saints to endure terrible pains."

"Worse," asked Bess, "than taking horrible, nasty, filthy medicines, worse than going to have teeth taken out by the dentist?"

"Worse than that," I answered.

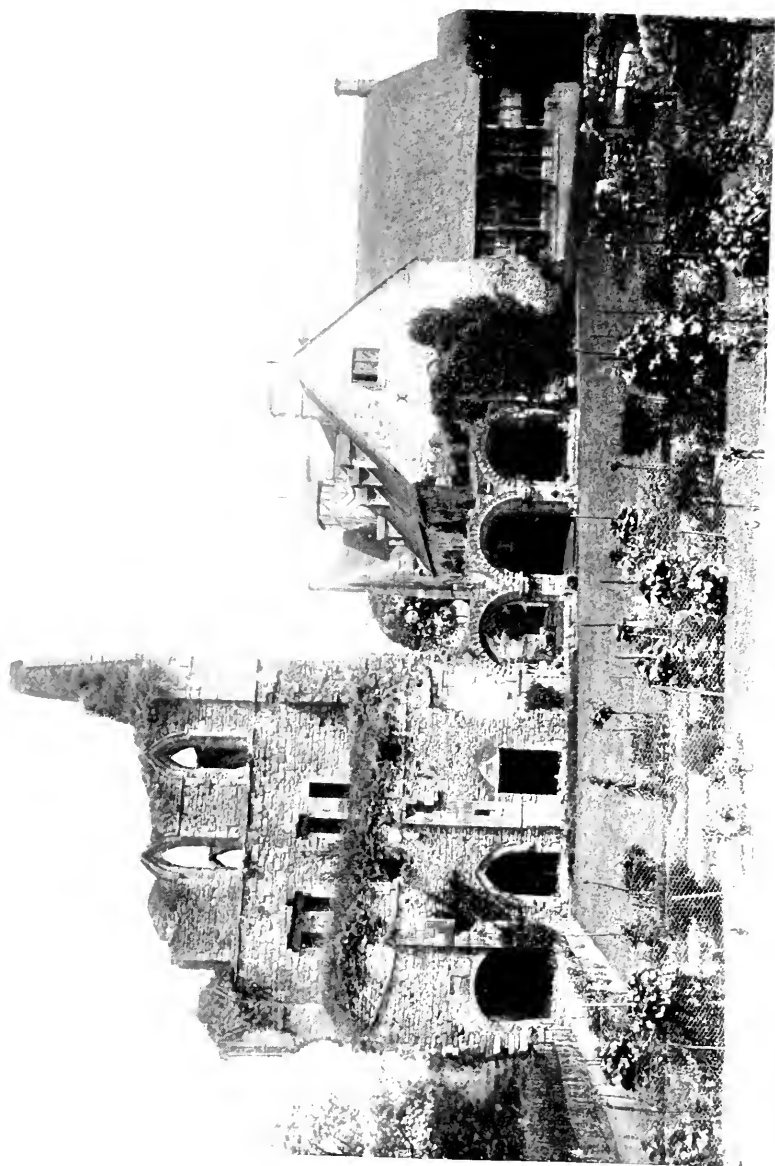


Photo by Frith.

THE CLOISTER GARDEN.

"Then I think I'll wait a little," replied Bess, with composure, "before I change; for I should not like a crown after losing my teeth, or worse, or even jam-rolly, if I had to take tumblers of horrid physic first. And I have heard Burbidge say that, 'them as wins a crown must walk on hot ploughshares first.' Still," she added, "I should sometimes like to be good."

"How about doing disagreeable things, Bess? For I fear, at first, that is what has to be done."

"Well, mama," answered Bess, "not too good; not good enough to die, but just good enough to get a little more money for good marks than I have ever got before."

And I saw by Bess's saucy smile that the day was a long, long way off when she would ever be what she calls very, very good, *i.e.*—

Never dirty her hands;

Never ruffle her hair; and

Never answer back those in authority.

For a moment we ceased talking, and looked at the old carved stone basin in which the successors of Roger de Montgomery's Clugniac monks bathed in the twelfth century. On the broken shaft which supported the basin are three carved panels; one represents the miraculous draught of fishes and the other two St. Paul and St. Peter.

Bess shook her head and repeated sadly, "Of course I should like to be a saint, but there must not be too much pain. It isn't fair of God to want *too much*."

Then we wandered round to the east side of the old house, and I looked up and pointed out to Bess the old stone gargoyles. And Bess looked too.

"Those," she said, "are Christian devils. Nana says we never could get on here without a Devil, and the monks had theirs too."

There are many times in life, I find, when it is wiser not to answer a child, and this was just one. Strong light often dazzles, and, after all, are we not all children groping in the dark?

We peeped into the kitchen from outside, and saw the coppers glimmering like red gold on the shelves of the old oak dresser. Auguste, the cook, was chopping some meat, and the blows he gave resounded merrily through the crisp frosty air. I called through the mullion window and asked if the little soiled suit of yesterday was dry, as Fred the groom was to ride over to Hawkmoor and take it there in the afternoon.

"Oui, madame la comtesse," cried Auguste, for by that title he always addressed me; not that I have a title, but that Auguste thinks it kind and polite so to address me. Besides, he has a confused belief that every English woman has a title of some kind, and that its exact nature is immaterial. As he spoke he opened the little oak door that communicates with the garden and exclaimed joyously—

"Voyez, madame, le jeune comte will still be a joli garçon in it. See, he will still rejoice the heart of his father and mother in grenat foncé." So saying good-natured Auguste passed into the garden displaying in his arms the red suit. A miracle seemed to have been performed. There it was, spotless and dry, and as good as it was when made by Messrs. Tags and Buttons of New Bond Street. Auguste laughed and talked excitedly, gesticulated wildly, and assured me that he had saved the costume by un secret—mais un secret suprême known alone to him and to his family. "See, madame," he cried superbly, "le bon Dieu ne pourrait pas mieux faire." Then he told me in confidence that it was not in vain that his mother had been over thirty

years gouvernante in the household of Madame la Princesse de P——. She knew everything, he asserted, “mais tous les secrets de ménage.”

I bowed my head, and happily had the tact not to press for an explanation, for I knew Auguste's recipes were real secrets, and as jealously guarded as those of any War Office in Europe.

Bess clapped her hands. “Hals will be pleased,” she said. “Because now old Fräulein need not be cross, and there will be no punishments.”

Auguste bowed solemnly. “Madame is satisfied,” he said, and retired like a beneficent fairy god-mother into the depth of his culinary kingdom.

The difference between our people and the Latin races is great. I have often noticed that Frenchmen or Italians are delighted to know any housewifely trick or wile—and that ignorance of all other departments but their own does not, in their eyes, constitute intrinsic merit. Foreigners seldom say, “That was not my business, sir,” or “not my department.” Whereas, in every well-constituted English domestic mind, “not my business,” or “not my work” is a creed to be cherished firmly, whatever else dissolves or changes, and is treated as the bulwark of English domestic life.

Before I left the kitchen door I asked for a saucer of chopped egg, a slice of sponge cake, a roast potato, and half an apple for the inhabitants of my aviary. Tramp and Tartar started barking furiously, in a noisy inconsequent way; and off Bess and I went armed with dainties. Mouse followed gravely, but not without misgivings, for she took no interest in birds, and felt, I am sure, that they enjoyed far too much consideration from me. Bess and I descended the steps which

led down from the garden to the field, but held on tightly to the rails, for it was slippery.

"Mummie," cried out Bess, "mind, for it is slippery all over, like walking over a glass door." However, we neither of us fell, and reached the aviary door in safety. Then we saw rather a wonderful sight: some forty canaries of all colours—green, cinnamon, jonquil, clear and mealy, yellow, spotted and flaked, were all to be found there. Poor little dears! They were making the most of the wintry gleams of sunshine, and some of them looked rather hunched up and puffy from the cold. They have a thatched shed, and in front, facing due south, a long flight of some twenty feet for exercise, beneath fine wire netting. But their playground was cold, as Bess said. As we entered the cage, they flew round us with cries of joy. Canaries are very easily tamed, and they perched on the saucer containing the food. They ate greedily the chopped egg, and pecked at the sponge cake and apple. Bess ran into their "bedroom" as she calls it, and squeezed on "their dressing table" the "heart" of a big potato cooked "in his jacket." One cock was singing sweetly. Burbidge must have given them water only a few minutes before, for it was still tepid in the dish, and some were drinking with avidity. We dropped a few drops of sherry into the water to act as a cordial, from a flask that Burbidge had got stowed away in a little box of what he calls "extras," and I added a couple of rusty nails from the same store. I noted that my dear old cock canary, "Bourton Boy," that I have had some ten years and known from an egg, looked a little mopish—what Bess calls "fat and fluffy." I watched him in silence, and tried to discover what it was he lacked. There was an ample supply of egg, apple,

and of potato, not to speak of canary, rape, and hemp seed, but he fluttered round and at last pecked violently at a crystal button on my coat; then I knew what he was after, and called out "sugar." Bess echoed the cry, and darted off like a little fairy for some, finely pounded, in a scrap of paper from kind Auguste, who adores "*toutes les bêtes de madame.*" We had discovered rightly what it was that the Bourton Boy was in need of. He uttered a note of joy, and fell upon the sugar with a right good will directly we had placed it in the cage, whilst Bess watched him.

"Why don't you give him lettuce, too? Auguste offered me some salad," she asked.

"It is not good for canaries till the spring," I replied. Then I went to the end of the shed to see if there was plenty of fat bacon hanging up—the birds' cod liver oil, as old Nana calls it. I inspected a piece some three inches long and two wide. It was pecked all over by voracious little beaks, and was quite thin in places. Fat bacon is an excellent adjunct to an aviary, and is one of the best means of keeping birds in health, and of special value to hens during the nesting season. In winter, also, it seems to be very nourishing, and to give great gloss and lustre to their plumage. After seeing that their larder was well supplied, I turned to their baking-tin, full of red sand and very fine oyster grit. It is really astonishing, what an amount of grit all birds require to keep them in health. I poked up the contents of the tin with my walking-stick. It was amusing to watch the birds. In a moment all had left the seed, egg, or potato, and were engaged in picking up the freshly turned sand. A few months ago I was obliged to have the floor of the aviary firmly cemented down, as otherwise I found that mice burrowed from

underneath and effected an entrance, and then attacked my pets. The cement in a few days hardened, and now is like a rock, and I am glad to say inroads from the furry little barbarians have become impossible.

"My children of light," as I call them, having been visited, I turned away and escaped with Bess out of the aviary, but not without great care, and having resource to some stratagems, for my little feathered friends all followed me closely, curious, and always hoping for fresh delights. At a given signal, Bess slipped under my arm, and we closed the door like lightning behind us.

As we mounted the stairs, we saw the old gardener Burbidge waiting for us at the top. He looked like a picture of Old Time, with his grey hair, his worn brown overcoat, his long grey beard, and behind all, the background of snow.

"They are all well," I called out to him, "in spite of the cold."

"They was matted up yesterday," answered the old man, pointing downwards to my pets. Then he went on to say how he and the gardeners strengthened the artificial hedge on the east side, by adding fir branches and some mats, "for it was fit to blow their feathers out, that mortal sharp was the eastwinder;" and Burbidge looked at my pets with indulgent pity, and added, "They be nesh folks, be canaries, for all they write about them." Then he suspected Bess of giving them forbidden food. "They mustn't have no green food. It be as bad for 'em as spring showers be for sucking gulleys" (goslings), he added, "and that be certain death."

"But I haven't given them anything not allowed," stammered out Bess, indignantly; "mama and I have only given them what we always do."

"Ah!" said Burbidge, softening, "that won't be no hurt then; and as to potato and apple, they be the best quill revivers out, come winter. But what sort of apple was it?"

I replied that the apple was a "Blenheim Orange" and no American.

"No need of foreign stuff in Shropshire," answered Burbidge, proudly. "Our late apples are as sound as if they were only fruited yesterday."

Then I told him that the potato was one of the same sort that I had last night at dinner—floury, sweet and mealy.

"Then I'll be bound," he replied, "you had an Up-to-Dater, or may be a Sutton's Abundance; they be both sound as a sovereign, real gold all through. No blotches or specks in they. We had four roods of both on the farm. Fresh land, no manure and a dusty summer, and tatters will take care of theirselves; but come a wet year, a field potato is worth two in a garden, although I says it as shouldn't, but truth is truth, although you have to look up a black chimney to find it, as folks say."

Then old Burbidge went on to tell me how "Potatoes be right house wenches in a garden, or same as clouts to floors; but don't you go to takin' 'em from their nature too early, for when the tops bleed the tubers will never be fit for squire's food, only fit for a petty tradesman's table," and this with Burbidge is always a dark, and outer land of disgrace.

Bess, Burbidge and I paced along the neat swept paths. At last I got my word in. "No damage done by the snow?" I asked.

"I don't allow no damage," was our old retainer's stern reply; "leastways, not after daylight. I and lads were out again with poles this morning."

We wandered round the close-clipped yews, and peeped over into the borders beyond, while Burbidge talked of "how all had been put to bed" with pride. "Them as wants next year must mind this," he exclaimed.

All my tea-roses, Chinese peonies, and tender plants had been duly covered up with fern; and branches of spruce and Austrian fir had been carefully placed in front of my clematises *Flammula*, *Montana*, and *Jackmanni*, and round the posts on which my *Crimson Rambler*, *jessamine*, and vine ramped in summer.

"They are just resting comfortable," said Burbidge, complacently. "We all want sleep—plants and men—but let the plants have it suitable, same as childer in their beds."

We had come to the end of the red-walled garden, and as he said this, Burbidge opened the wrought-iron gate, and I passed down the flight of stairs which leads to the front drive.

"To-morrow we must talk about the list of flowers," I cried, before he was out of sight and hearing; "we must not forget the butter-beans, and the foreign golden lettuces."

Burbidge nodded, but not enthusiastically. He doesn't what he calls "hold to foreign things." England is his country, and, above all, Shropshire his county, but being very faithful, he is indulgent to my foibles. As Bess and I walked along the pathway, we lingered in the cloisters, and for a moment looked away at the far distance.

We saw nothing but white fields which lay glittering in the sunshine, and the spire of the parish church to the west, which shone like a lance under the clear sky.

"Some day," Bess said, "take me right away,

mamsie, far away with the dogs," and she pointed to the snow-clad meadows that stretched round the old Abbey precincts. "I like fields," she added, "better than gardens to walk in, for there are no 'don'ts' there for the dogs."

This remark from Bess alluded to my dislike of broken hedges, for, as Burbidge says, "A yew hedge broken, is a kingdom ruined." I remember this scathing remark was made on a terrible occasion when the great Mouse dashed through a yew hedge in hot pursuit of a very young rabbit, and indeed training down and replacing the broken limb of the yew was no slight matter. It was, in Burbidge's phraseology, "a long and break-back job, bad as sorting sheep on the Long-Mynd in a snow-storm;" for, as our old gardener expressed it, "Nature be often full of quirks, and sometimes disobliging as a maiden aunt that's got long in the tooth, and that walks snip-snappy, with an empty purse."

Ever since this mishap my great hound's sporting habits have been, therefore, somewhat restricted in the Pleasaunce. But if things have gone wrong by evil chance, and large, very large, paw-marks can be detected on the beds, Burbidge is not without his passing sarcasm. "I prefer a bullock," or "Big dogs be made for kennels," he will say. I recalled these reminiscences of spring and summer days, but felt sure, for all he said, that Burbidge would never hurt a hair of my dog's tail. Gradually the sunlight failed, and Bess and I went indoors. I found my friend Constance, of the Red House, awaiting my return.

Her eye fell on my garden catalogues. "One wants in life many good ways of using common things," she said; "a variety in fact, without the expense of change."

And then Constance agreed with me that vegetables in England were often only a waste material. "Many of us," I held, "only know sodden potatoes and cabbage, or salad with an abominable, heavy cream sauce that reminds one of a furniture polish."

"Vegetables our side of the Channel," laughed Constance, "are a serious difficulty, partly on account of the cook, and partly on account of the gardener."

We agreed that the gardener would hardly ever pick them young or tender enough, and that this applies to beans, carrots, peas and artichokes. This set me thinking, and I mentioned a visit I once paid to Chartres some years ago. It was in early June, and I saw several waiters all shelling peas in the courtyard of the principal hotel. I was surprised to note that each man had three little baskets in front of him into which he threw his peas. I was astonished to see so many little baskets, and asked why all the peas could not be put into one basket. "Oh, madame," said the man in authority, "at Chartres we acknowledge three qualities of peas, and then there are the pods, for the pea-soup." In what English household would it be possible to get the same amount of trouble taken?

"The methods adopted in England are different," said Constance dryly. "As regards peas—generally the gardener leaves them till they have attained the hardness of bullets, and then the cook cooks them solely with water, and so a very good vegetable is made as nasty as it is possible to make it."

Then we both came to the conclusion that peas, "as a fine art," should be picked very young, or else they were very unwholesome, and that they should have mixed with them a little gravy, cream, or fresh butter. After this Constance asked me about my butter-beans, which,

she told me, she thought excellent one day when she lunched with us last September. I told her that the variety that I grew chiefly was Wax Flageolet, and that my seed came from the foreign seedsman, Oskar Knopff, but that now all sorts of butter-beans can be got from English nurserymen, and that Messrs. Barr and Veitch have those and many other excellent sorts.

"They are also as easy to grow, Burbidge says, as the old-fashioned French kinds," I remarked, "but more juicy and mellow, although they do not look quite so nice on the table. Auguste likes to give them a few minutes longer in boiling, and invariably adds, as is the French and Italian habit, some haricot beans of last year of the old scarlet runner sort boiled quite soft." Then I praised the foreign habit of serving all vegetables in cream, oil, or a little gravy, and added it is setting the vegetable picture in a good frame. Then from beans we turned to potatoes, and we discussed the best kinds to grow in a moderate-sized garden.

From vegetables we wandered off to embroidery.

"I want," Constance told me, "to design a quilt for a big 'four-poster.' What they would in the seventeenth century have called a 'great wrought sheet.' I am thinking of doing," she said, "a great border of old-world flowers all round my 'bed-spread,' as it is now called in the art shops."

"What more enchanting," I cried enthusiastically, and recalled to her mind the beautiful woodcuts that illustrate "Gerard's Herbal." "There are there, all the flowers and herbs," I said, "that you could possibly wish for, and they are all exquisitely drawn and well adapted for such a purpose. The Great Holland, the single Velvet, the Cinnamon, the Provence and the Damask roses, the very names are full of poetry; then

of wild flowers, you must think of the Wolfe's Bane, the Mede Safron, Ladies' Smock, and Golden Mousesear. In the garden, there is the Guinny Hen, and, above all, the gilly-flowers of sorts, and May pinks; and round you might work scrolls of words from poets and philosophers about the joys of sleep." Then we talked the matter over, and I got quite keen about the colour of the background, and suggested a particular tint of jonquil canary. But Constance would not hear of this, declared she preferred white, and meant to use the hand-made "homespun," as Shropshire folks call the sheets of the country that were made formerly at Westwood and round Wenlock up to the second half of the last century. "I bought," she told me, "several old pairs of large hand-made linen sheets at a sale two years ago, and I feel sure they will be delightful to work on. They are not unlike the Langdale linen, only not so fine." Then Constance went on to say how, in the eighteenth century, every farmhouse in Shropshire had its spinning wheels, and every cottager her love spinning, when her neighbours would come and spin with her out of love and good-fellowship. Besides the good wife's spinning, many a maiden's wedding garments were thus made for her by her own playmates, while it was with her own hands that the lass's wedding sheets were always spun.

Was it a better world, I have often asked myself, when women loved their spinning-wheels and tambour-frames?

Anyway it was a simpler world we both agreed, and probably a more contented one, for all ladies then took delight in superintending, and in the perfection of household work; and the world, high and low, did not commonly feel wasted as it so often

does now; and our tongues ran on, on the servant problem.

"A little more education," argued Constance, "and perhaps the world will move more smoothly. If all the girls could play a tune or two and knew a little more French, the world would not be so proud of one-finger melodies, or isolated syllables of Gallic, that we can vouch are incomprehensible to the native understanding. 'Tis not to be expected, as old Betty in the Dingle says, 'as the sun can find all the crannies at once.' Education is slow because gentility is great, and real love or desire for knowledge rare. What we want is not, as Montaigne said, 'more education, but better education.'"

Then we wandered on to what is knowledge and what are the things worth knowing, and no doubt the hour till tea would have passed all too quickly, if we had not been interrupted by Bess, who dashed downstairs breathless, and bubbling over with excitement.

"A letter," she cried, "and a letter all for me. Nana," she explained, "said I must not say 'yes' without your leave. But why should papa only have dogs as a matter of course? Here is the note."

I took the little crumpled paper from Bess's hands. It was from Maimie Armstrong and written to Bess by a friend's little girl. I read that "there are several little pups. Mamma," continued Maimie, "says you are to have one when it is old enough to leave old Nick-nack. They are all blind now and cannot see, but suck all day. One shall be sent in a basket.

"P.S.—I didn't write all this myself, because ink often goes wrong with me and I can't spell, but James, the footman, has done it for me." And then in a very large round child's hand. "Your loving friend, Maimie Armstrong."

I straightened out the little sheet and then looked round at Bess. She was literally trembling with excitement and she could hardly speak, but somehow she managed to gasp out, "Mama, I cannot live without a pug-pup." For the moment I believed she was speaking the truth, so I answered, "Yes, dear, we must have even a pug-pup if it is a necessity."

"Yes, yes," cried Bess, with rapture; "and then I shall be quite, quite happy ever afterwards."

"What a good thing it is to be a child," said Constance, softly. "One wants everything so badly."

At my acceding to Bess's request, Bess ran to me and hugged me rapturously, and called out to old Nana, who had just appeared at the head of the stairs, "I told you so; and the pug-pup is to live in the nursery."

Nana did not greet this news with the pleasure expected of her, and as the two mounted the stairs, I heard my old female retainer grumble something to herself. But give her time, as Bess always says, "and Nana will always come round, and find you a sweet out of some cupboard before she's done."

My old Nana keeps her chamber spotless, tells my little maid long old stories of Shropshire, and wages ceaseless war against fringes and furbelows in her nursery maid. "God made me a good servant," she always says, with austere pride. And I add reverently, "The Lord only knows the extent of her long devotion." It has weathered many storms, and has bid defiance to the blasts of misfortune, and to the frosts of adversity. Like the gnarled oak of one of her native forests, Nan has sheltered many young generations of saplings, and in her master's family have centred her interests, her pleasures: to their well-being she has given her life.

In the evening, after dinner, I went up the old stone

staircase that leads to the nursery. Bess was sleeping peacefully, but she was not hugging, as is her wont, her favourite old doll "Sambo."

"Her wouldn't to-night," explained Nana, "my little lamb; her thinks of nothing but the pug-pup. I holds to dolls for little ladies, but Miss Bess, she holds to dogs for herself. 'Oh, Nana,' her said, when I was bathing her, 'I could not live without dogs. God makes them into brothers for me.'

"Then I said, 'Why do you like 'em like that? 'Tis almost a sin.' She answered, 'God never makes them answer back; and then we can do with different toys.'

"Well," concluded Nan, pensively, as she took up her sewing, "my old aunt said God Almighty made caterpillars for something, and I suppose even dogs b'aint made for nought, leastways, they be pleasures to some."

I laughed, for behind me, padding up the stairs reluctantly, but faithfully, I saw through the open door my great Dane.

"I should miss Mouse dreadfully. Bess is right," I cried, "one's dog never answers back, and is loving and sympathetic at all times, in and out of season." I passed gently out of the room and went downstairs. I left the dimity-hung chamber, and as I did so I had a vision of a little bright, happy face. At seven, a pug-pup may seem almost a fairy prince, or possess all the gifts of the philosopher's stone. "Oh, happy childhood," I said, "which asks so little and wants it so badly."

Great logs of wood blazed gaily on the great open hearth of the chapel hall, between delicate bronze Italian dogs. The moon was shining down from a sky of placid splendour, and the little oratory looked in the evening light wonderful, and mystic. Through the old irregular lattice windows I felt as if a message of peace

was being brought to me. No sound of bird or cry of beast greeted my ears. A copy of Thomas à Kempis' immortal book lay near me on the table. I took it up and read.

"In the Cross is Salvation, in the Cross is life. In the Cross is the perfection of sanctity." I read the beautiful words over, and over again. How exquisite the language is. What hope and radiance beam through every syllable. "Yes," I said, in the stillness of this wonderful place, "I too can hear His message, for this once also was a holy and austere place, where men poured out their lives in the ecstasies of prayer." Then I thought of the monk of St. Agnes as I saw him in imagination across the long centuries, denying himself all that makes life sweet, and welcome to most men, and devoting himself heart and soul to holy meditation, and still holier penmanship. Idleness he abhorred; labour, as he said, was his companion, silence his friend, prayer his auxiliary. There seemed almost an overpowering sense of holiness in the serene calm of the Abbey, and I strove against it as if the air were unduly burdened with an incense too strong to bear. I rose and went to the door and let in the night air. I saw the dim outline of the trees and the dimmer outline of garden-bed and bush. As I looked, in strange contrast, the glory of the summer days returned to me. In the cold of January my mind floated back to the joy of faintly budding woods, to deep red roses, to the rich perfume of bee-haunted limes, and to pure lines of blossoming lilies. All these I saw in my soul as I stood and gazed into the chill darkness. The flowers seemed to laugh at me, and were accompanied by fair visions of Joy, Love, and Life; but grim forlorn winter, the symbol of the lonely soul in the mountain heights, has

also its own beauties. I looked round again, and the mystic sides of Renunciation held me fast. The peace and devotion of the past seemed to hold and chain me with irresistible force. I shut the door and stood again in the place where saints had stood.

Beside me was the great stone altar with its seven holy crosses, before which kneeling kings had received the sacrament, and where saint and sinner had received alike absolution. Outside alone the stars were witnesses of my presence. They shone as they had shone a thousand years ago, as they will shine a thousand years to come. Pale, mystic, and eternal, a holy dew of wonder seemed to fall upon my shoulders, the Peace of God is not of this world, nor can it be culled from the joys of life.

It is the Christian's revelation of glory, but those that serve can hear at times the still calm voice of benediction in such silent places as this, or in the supreme moment of duty, "for in the cross is the invincible sanctuary of the humble, in the cross of Christ is the key of Paradise."

The next morning I rose early. There was much to do, for life can be as busy in the country as in town. I wrote my letters, and according to my constant custom—much laughed at, be it said, by many friends—jotted down my engagements, duties, and pleasurable excitements for the day. There were—

Some blankets to send to the poor. My list of flower seeds. And then Bess and I were to go sledging in the lanes.

To English people sledging never seems a quite real amusement, and always to belong a little to the region of a fairy-story.

Punctual to the moment, Burbidge appeared with

long sheets of foolscap, and we made out the list of seeds.

"Burbidge," I said grandly, as he handed to me the sheets of paper, "I leave the vegetables to you, save just my foreign pets."

Burbidge bowed graciously and we were about to begin, when he could not resist his usual speech about disliking foreign men, foreign flowers, and foreign seeds.

"Yes," I rejoined slyly; "but you must remember how many people liked the Mont D'Or beans and praised your Berlin lettuces."

"Well, so long as you and the squire were pleased, I know my duty," replied Burbidge, mollified.

"Which is?" I could not refrain from asking, for the old man has always his old-fashioned formula at the tip of his tongue.

"Which is," repeated old Burbidge, rehearsing his old-fashioned catechism solemnly, "watering in droughts, weeding all weathers, and keeping a garden throughout peart and bobbish as if it war the Lord's parlour."

"It is a very good duty," I said.

"Yes," answered Burbidge, complacently; "new fangled scholars haven't got far beyond that, not even when they puts Latin names to the job. They have County Councils now, and new tricks of all sorts, but 'tis a pity as so many get up so early to misinform themselves, but there be some as allus will live underground and call it light, and there be none so ignorant as they as only reads books. They be born bats for all the garnish of their words."

After which there followed a long pause—then Burbidge handed me his list of vegetables.

"I haven't forgotten the foreigneerers," he said indulgently, "carrots, potatoes, peas, onions, celery, and

greens, sprouts, and curls—enough even for a kitchen man, and the Lord Almighty would have a job to know what a Froggy cannot chop up or slip into a sauce. One might stock a county with extras, if one listened to they."

Then we turned to the flower list. Burbidge pointed with a big brown finger to my entry of "Love in the Mist," as I wrote, for I proposed having great patches of it in front of my lines of Madonna lilies, varied by patches of carnations, stocks, and zinnias in turns.

"I don't hold," he said severely, "to so much bluery greenery before my lilies. There won't be no colour in my borders." Then when I protested, he added, "You like it, mam, 'cause it has a pretty name. There's a deal in a name, but 'tisn't all that call it 'Love in the Mist.' 'Devil in the Bush' was what my mother used to call it, and other folks 'Laddie in a Hole.' But there's a deal too much talked about such nonsense. Leave the maids alone, and eat your vittals, is what I tell my boys, and then there'd be a lot of cakey nonsense left out of the world."

Then Burbidge, knowing my heart was, what he terms, "set on blows," bowed slowly, and vanished.

Left to myself, I looked down the catalogue of flower seeds and ordered to my heart's content; packets of shadowy Love in the Mist, and Eckford's delightful sweet peas in exquisite shades of red, mauve, lavender, rose, pink, scarlet, and pale yellow. Then I thought of the sweetness of Centaury, the brilliant yellow of the Coreopsis, the perfume of the mulberry-tinted Scabious, and the azure glory of the Convolvulus Minor. I recalled the beauty of the godetias and the opal splendour of the larkspurs, while the gorgeous shades of the Malopes seemed to make an imaginary background of magnificence in

my borders, and in my mind's eye the diaphanous beauty of the Shirley poppies seemed to add to the gorgeous sunlight of even sovereign summer itself. And lastly, as the latest annuals of the year, I did not forget to add some single moon-faced sunflowers, such as I once saw at Linley in the old garden there—worn, white, shadowy creatures with the tears of autumn in their veins.

It is a great delight to order your own flower list. It means a true wealth of beauty in the future, brilliant colours and sweet odours, and the promise of so much in the present. Promise is often like the petals of last year's roses, and yet full of delights is the garden of imagination. I sat on and dreamt of my future borders, in which no frost nor hail, nor any evil thing would fall, and sat on drawing little squares and rounds on white paper borders when my leisure was suddenly disturbed. Too much leisure is not given to any mother of the twentieth century. And Bess entered like a thunder clap.

"Mama," she called, "Mama, Crawley declares that you are going out sledging. May I come—I want to, I want to?"

"Yes," I answered; "but you must do just as I tell you, get out if I tell you, and not do anything foolish."

Bess agreed to all my stipulations. What would she not have agreed to, to gain her point? And conditions, before they happen, do not sit heavily on a child's soul.

At last even luncheon was over, and Bess awaited the sledge, expectant and triumphant on the mounting-block.

Just as Bess was sure for the hundredth time that it must be almost tea time, and that something must have happened to Bluebell, the sound of the bells rang out across the frosty air.

"It comes, it comes," cried Bess, rapturously, "and oh, mama, isn't it fun. It's better than walnuts on Sundays, or damming up a stream with Burbidge, or even helping to wash Mouse with Fred," and my little maid, in a flame-coloured serge mantle trimmed with grey Chinchilla fur, leapt about with excitement.

A minute later, and Fremantle and the footman ran out with blankets, which they carried in their arms in great brown-paper parcels. Each parcel bore the name of one of the seven old women who were that afternoon to receive a pair of blankets. We got in, and then somehow all the parcels were piled up and round us—how I cannot really say, but like a conjuring trick somehow it was done. At last, when all was put in and Bess screamed out "safe," I shook the reins, old Bluebell looked round demurely, and then trotted off. Mouse gave a deep bay of exultation, Tramp and Tartar yelped frantically, and away we went.

The dogs barked, the bells jingled, and a keen, crisp wind played upon us, packages and pony.

We drove along the old town. We passed the old Town Hall with its whipping-post, and so up High Street past the beautiful old house known as Ashfield Hall, once the old town house of the Lawleys, where Charles I. is said to have slept during his wars, and where Prince Rupert another time dined and rested with some of the gentlemen of his guard. Ashfield Hall is a striking old house, with a gateway, mullion and latticed windows, and beyond extends the old street, known since the days of the pilgrims as Hospital Street.

Overhead stretched a laughing blue sky, and all round was what Bess was pleased to term the Snow Queen's Kingdom. First of all, we went to Newtown. We passed the red vicarage with its great dark green

ilex, and then up by the picturesque forge, where the blacksmith was hammering on a shoe, away by the strange old cottages on the Causeway, with a fall below them into the road of some seven or eight feet, on we went as quickly as fat Bluebell could be persuaded to trot. Then we mounted the hill, and I got out and led the old pony to ease its burden, for a sledge is always a heavy weight when it has to be dragged up hill. At last old Jenny James's cottage was reached, and her parcel duly handed out.

"I like giving things," said Bess, superbly. "It seems to make you happier."

"Yes," I answered; "but gifts are best when we give something that we want ourselves."

"Don't you want the blankets, mama?" asked Bess, abruptly.

"Well, not exactly, dear," I answered. "Giving them didn't mean that I had to go without my dinner, or even had to give up ordering my seed list this morning."

"Must one really do that," asked Bess sadly, "before one can give anything?"

"Perhaps, little one," I said, "to taste the very best happiness." Then there was a little pause, which was at last broken by Bess turning crimson and saying—

"Mamsie, I think it must be very, very difficult to be quite, quite happy."

I did not explain, but saw from Bess's expression that I had sown a grain of a seed, and wondered when it would blossom. Then we turned round and slipped down the hill at a brisk rattle, all the dogs following hotly behind, to an old dame who had long had a promise of a blanket. The old body came out joyfully and stood by her wicket gate, beaming with pleasure. It is an awful thing, sometimes, the joy of the poor over some little

gift. It brings home to us at times our own unworthiness more than anything else.

Old Sukey, as she is called by her neighbours, took her blankets from Bess with delight. "I shall sleep now," she said, "like a cat by the hearth, come summer come winter," and her old wrinkled face began to twitch, and tears to rise in her poor old rheumy eyes. "Pretty dear," she said to Bess, "'tis most like a blow itself. I wish I had a bloom to offer, but 'tis only a blessing now that I can give thee."

Again we turned, and pattered back post-haste up the Barrow Road to a distant cottage.

"Is it a good thing to get a blessing?" asked Bess, suddenly.

"A very good thing, for it makes even the richest richer."

"Then," answered Bess, "when I grow up I mean to get a great many blessings."

"How, little one, will you do that?"

"Why," answered Bess, "I shall give to everybody everything they want, and buy for all the children all the toys that I can find."

"But supposing that you are not rich, that you haven't money in your purse, or a cheque-book from the bank like papa?"

"Then I shall have to pray—and that will do it, for I'm sure the good Lord wouldn't like to disoblige me."

At last all our visits were paid, and we had left seven happy old souls, whom it was a comfort to think would all sleep the sounder for our visit of that day.

As we drove home, Bess suddenly turned round and said—

"Mamsie, why can't they buy blankets?"

It is very hard for the child-mind to grasp that the

necessities of life—bread, blankets, and beds—do not come, in a child's language, "all by themselves."

Puppies, pets, and chocolates, children can understand have to be paid for; but the dull things, they consider, surely ought to grow quite naturally, like the trees outside the nursery windows, all by themselves, and of their own accord, as they would say.

I tried to explain to Bess what poverty really was, and told her what it would mean to have no money, but to buy the absolute bare necessities of life. Bess listened open-mouthed, and at the end exclaimed—

"Why has God given me so much, and to poor children, then, so little?"

"I wonder," I replied; "but, anyway, as you have got so much, you must do what you can to make other little boys and girls happier. For God, when he gives much, will also ask much some day."

Bess did not answer, and we drove back in silence. It was very still along the country lanes, save for the tinkling of the joyous bells. Behind us followed our pack, Mouse panting somewhat, for she had fed at luncheon time, not wisely, but too well; but Tramp and Tartar scampered gaily after us. The whole country seemed enveloped in a white winding-sheet, and the sunlight was dying out of the west. A soft white mist was stealing up over all, but the voice of death was gentle, calm, almost sweet, across the silent world. Cottages looked out by their windows, blinking, and appeared almost as white as the snow beneath them.

Old Bluebell seemed to know that her trot to the Abbey was her last journey, and went with a good will. We passed the new hospital, dashed down Sheinton Street, and so into the Italian gates by the old Watch Tower of the abbot's, beyond the old Bull Ring

where, through many centuries, bulls were baited by dogs.

As we drew up before the door, Bess exclaimed, regretfully—

"Oh, mama, why has it all stopped? I should like driving in a sledge to go on for ever and ever."

I kissed the little maid, and we went into tea. Bess hardly spoke, and I thought her wearied by the excitement of the drive, but that night, when I went up to see her in bed, she called out—

"Mamsie, mamsie, come quite close. A secret." So I sat down on the little bed, and the little arms went round my neck. "Mama, I have looked out a heap—a heap of toys—to send off to poor children. My new doll Sabrina, my blue pig, my little box of tea things, the new Noah's Ark, but Nana will not pack them up. She says they're too good for poor children. Isn't she wicked, for I want to give them all, and to be happy—happy as you mean me to be."

CHAPTER II

FEBRUARY

“The Hag is astride
This night for to ride,
The devil and she together,
Through thick and through thin,
Now out, and now in,
Though ne’er so foule be the weather.”

HERRICK’S *Hesperides*.

SOME weeks had passed, and I had been away from home. Rain had fallen, and the snow had vanished like a dream—the first dawn of spring had come. Not spring as we know her in the South of France or in Southern Italy—gorgeous, gay, debonair—but shy, coy, and timid. The spring of the North is like a maiden of the hills, timid and reserved, yet infinitely attractive, what our French friends would call “une sensitive.”

There was, as yet, very little appearance that winter “brear Winter,” as Spenser calls him, was routed and obliged with his legions of frost and snow, to fly before the arrival of youth and life, and the breath of triumphant zephyrs. A spring in the North is chiefly proclaimed by the voice of the stormcock in some apple tree, by the green peering noses of snowdrops, and here and there a crimson tassel on the hazel tree and larch; but, above all, by the splendour of golden and

purple lights which come and go across the hillsides and athwart wood and coppice. The turf, as I walked along, I noticed was moist and soft, and oozed up under my feet. February fill-dyke, as she is called, had come in due order, and in appointed form. Little puddles glistened on the drive, and for all the patches here and there of blue, there were leaden shadows and grey clouds, and it was wise, if you wandered abroad, to have at hand the protecting influence of an umbrella. I walked up the back drive, till I stood before the well of our patron saint.

Long centuries ago the holy and beautiful daughter of Merewald, King of Hereford, according to old tradition, came here and founded a nunnery. The story runs that St. Milburgha, pursued by the importunities of a Welsh prince, found a refuge at Wenlock, and gathered round her a community of devoted women.

Tradition tells the story of how the saint fled on one occasion to Stoke, a hamlet in the Clee Hills. The legend says that she fell fainting from her milk-white steed as she neared a spring there. As she did so she struck her head against a stone, causing blood to flow freely from the wound. At that time, about the middle of February, some countrymen were occupied in sowing barley in a field which was called the Placks, and seeing the lovely lady in so sad a plight, they ran to her assistance.

"Water," she wailed, but none seemed at hand. Then St. Milburgha bade her steed strike his hoof against the rock, and, believed the hagiologists, water, clear, wonderful and blessed, leapt forth at her command. As it flowed, the lady is reported to have said: "Holy water, flow now, and from all time." Then she stretched forth her hands and blessed the

fields where the barley had been sown, and immediately, before the astonished eyes of all beholders, the grain burst forth into tender blades of grass. Then St. Milburgha turned to the countrymen.

"The wicked prince," she said, "and his pack of bloodhounds are close upon me, therefore I must fly." And she bade them adieu, but not till she had told them to sharpen their scythes, for the reaping of the barley should take place that night.

All came to pass as the Blessed One had foretold, for as the countrymen were busy reaping their grain, the heathen prince and his followers arrived on the scene.

But the labourers were true and faithful hearts, and neither threats nor promises could extract from them in what direction the Lady Milburgha had fled.

When the prince saw that the peasants had begun to reap the grain that had been sown the self-same day, a great awe fell upon him and his lords, and he vowed that it was a vain and foolish thing to fight against the Lord, and his anointed.

Other old writers tell how the river Corve, at the voice of God, saved Lady Milburgha; and how, as soon as she had passed over its waters, from an insignificant little brooklet it swelled into a mighty flood which effectually barred the prince's progress. Amongst other incidents mentioned by Saxon chroniclers, we hear that St. Milburgha drove away the wild geese from the plots of the poor. Many are the legends of the beautiful Shropshire saint that are still cherished in the wild country between the Severn and the Clee. She was as fair as she was good, it was said, and old writers told how, when a veil once fell from her head in the early morning sunshine, it remained suspended in the air until replaced by her own hand, and how she wrought a miracle

by prayer and brought back to life the son of a poor widow; while all the while, a mystic and sacred flame burnt beside her, a visible manifestation of her sanctity, for all to see.

I thought of all these beautiful old legends, fairy-stories of grace, they seemed to me, as I wandered up the back lane and paused before the saint's well at Wenlock, which is still said to cure sore eyes.

As I stopped to gaze down upon the deep well below, I noticed that the little wicket gate was open, and that a child with a little jug was about to descend the stairs to fetch what she termed in the Shropshire tongue, "a spot o' water."

"Have you no water at home, my child, that you come here?" I asked.

"Oh yes," replied the little maiden, Fanny Milner by name, "there be a hougry drop in our well after the rains; but grandam says I must get some from here, or she'll never be able to read her chapter come Sunday afternoon, with glasses or no glasses. Grandam says as it have a greater power of healin' than ever lies in doctor's messes, or than in bought stuffs neither. It be a *blessed* water, grandam says, and was washed in by a saint—and when saints meddle with water, they makes, grandam says, a better job of it than any doctor, let him be fit to burst with learning."

I smiled at the apple-cheeked little lass's quaint talk, and helped her to fill her jar. The belief in the healing powers of the old well lingers on, and many of the inhabitants of Much Wenlock are still of opinion that water fetched from St. Milburgha's well can cure many diseases, and particularly all malign affections of the eyes.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the holy

wells of many Welsh and Shropshire wells degenerated into Wishing wells. They then lost their sacred character, and became centres of rural festivities.

It is said that at Much Wenlock on "Holy Thursday," high revels were held formerly at St. Milburgha's well; that the young men after service in the church bore green branches round the town, and that they stopped at last before St. Milburgha's well. There, it is alleged, the young maidens threw in crooked pins and "wished" for sweethearts. Round the well, young men drank toasts in beer brewed from water collected from the church roof, whilst the women sipped sugar and water, and ate cakes. After many songs and much merriment, the day ended with games such as "Pop the Green Man down," "Sally Water," and "The Bull in the Ring," which games were followed by country dances, such as "The Merry Millers of Ludlow," "John, come and kiss me," "Tom Tizler," "Put on your smock o' Monday," and "Sellingers all."

Such was the custom at Chirbury, at Churchstoke, and at many of the Hill wakes, and from lonely cottage and village hamlets the boys and girls gathered together, and danced and played in village and town.

After shopping in the town, I entered the little old red-walled garden where my annuals blossom in the lovely long June days. All looked sad and brown, and "packed by" for rest, as Burbidge calls it. I noticed, however, a few signs of returning life. The snowdrops had little green noses, which peered above the ground, and here and there the winter aconites had bubbled up into blossom. What funny little prim things they were with their bonnets of gold, and their frills of emerald green. I noted, also, that the "Mezeron-tree," as Bacon calls it, was budding. How sweet would be its fragrance a few



Photo by Frith.

THE RED WALLED GARDEN.

weeks later, I thought, under the glow of a warm March sun.

I passed along, and looked at a line of yellow crocuses. The most beautiful of all crocuses, veritable lamps of fire in a garden, are those known as the Cloth of Gold. The golden thread was full of promise, but as yet no blossom was expanded. How glorious they would be when they opened to the sunshine. There is indeed almost heat in their colour, it is so warm and splendid.

As I stood before these signs of dawning life, two starlings flitted across the garden. How gay they were in their brilliant iridescent plumage! The sun, as they passed me, struck the sheen of their backs, and they seemed to shine a hundred colours, all at once. I tried to count the colours that the sun brought forth in them, gold, red, green, blue, gray and black with silver lights; but as I named the colours, words seemed bald and inadequate to describe the beauty and mutability of their hundred tints, for, as they moved, each colour changed, dissolved, reappeared and vanished, to grow afresh in some more wonderful and even more exquisite tint. And then suddenly the sun was obscured behind a cloud, and my starlings, that seemed a minute ago to hold in their plumage the beauty of the sun and the moon and of the stars, became in a twinkling poor brown, everyday, common little creatures. Like Ashputtel when the charm was gone, they looked common little vulgar creatures, and as they flew over the wall into the depths of the ivy on the ruined church, I wondered why I had ever admired them.

Starlings, some fifty years ago, were often kept as pets. Burbidge has told me that they are the cleverest mimics that breathe, being "born apes," so to speak. Now, however, my old friend declares, "none will do with

them, for nobody cares for nought but popinjays, and then they must have the colours of a gladiolus married to the voice of a piano." So the English starling is no longer a village pet. A few minutes later, and Burbidge told me that a spray of *Chionodoxa Luciliæ* was out.'

I peered round and I saw some little hard china like buttons, folded tight in a sheath, and beyond, a cluster of bronze noses, about a quarter of an inch above the ground. How lovely they will be, I thought, all these delicate spring flowers. All blue, and all wonderfully beautiful from the deep sapphire blue of the *Chionodoxa Sardensis*, to the pale lavender of the dainty and exquisite *Alleni*.

Yes, the world is alive, I said, and laughed; for I knew that spring must come in spite of snows and frosts, that the breath of life had gone forth, mysterious, wonderful, the miracle of all the miracles, and that the joy of spring and the glory of summer must come, as inevitably as death and winter.

I turned and inspected a large bed of Chinese Peonies. I moved a little of the protecting bracken placed there by the loving hand of Burbidge, and peeped into the litter. Yes, they too, had heard the call of spring. A few shoots had pierced through the soil, and they were of the richest blood-red colour, like the shoots of the tea-roses on the verandah of our hotel at Mentone. They were of the deepest crimson, with a light in them that recalled the splendour of a dying sun. Then I covered up the shoots quickly for fear of night frosts, but with hope in my heart, for everywhere I knew the earth must burst into bud and blossom; and as I listened to the storm-cock in the plantation, I rejoiced with him in the lengthening days, and in the growing sunshine.

I passed out of the garden, and walked down the stone stairs, through the old wrought-iron gate, that is said to have belonged to the house where the Rye House Plot was hatched. Just outside, and perched on a silver holly, I saw a lovely cock chaffinch. A second later, he was strutting gaily up and down on the grass! What a grand fellow he was, with his lavender head, his greenish-grey back, his salmon breast, and the brilliant white bars on his wings! What a cheery, light-hearted little creature! "Joyeux comme un pinson," the French say, and he is certainly the most light-hearted of English birds. The Twink, or Bachelor bird he is often nicknamed, for when winter comes, many of the cocks stretch their wings and fly off to foreign parts and leave the hens behind. The pied-finch is his name in the village. By nature a most joyous bird, the pied-finch is the last of the summer singers, singing gaily into July, when the thrush and blackbird are mute. I stood and watched him as he hopped about the sward. He took no notice that I was near, for the Bachelor bird is very fearless and curiously little apprehensive, or timid. All of a sudden, I turned round and saw my great hound Mouse behind me. "Mouse!" I cried, and with a bound she was beside me. For the first twenty-four hours after my return, Mouse is miserable out of my sight. She always gives me a boisterous welcome, and will not leave me for a moment. She sniffs at my boxes, watches me out of the corner of her eye, and wanders round me, trying often in a foolish, dumb way to block my passage, if she thinks I wish to leave the room.

Panting, and running behind my dog, followed Bess.

"Mums," she said, "we couldn't think where you was gone. We hunted everywhere. 'Like enough,'

Burbidge said, 'you was hunting for flowers.' But don't bother about little spikes and green things, for Mouse and I want you badly."

"Hals is coming," continued Bess, "and this time without his crab-tree governess. Burbidge says, 'Give me a Fräulein to turn the cream sour;' and declares that 'You could make vinegar out of her!'"

"Well, then, my dear," I said, "you and Hals can thoroughly enjoy yourselves, for you will be alone."

"Yes," answered Bess, "for when I saw Hals I said, 'Nothing but old, old clothes—clothes that will nearly want gum to stick them on, and that won't mind any mud.'"

"Did you enjoy yourself at Hals' birthday?" I asked, for on that eventful day I was away.

"I should think I did, mamsie," and Bess's eyes glistened at the recollection. "There was no conjurer, but the dearest little white dog in the world, that did tricks, and he knew more tricks than a pig at a fair, Nana said; and after that Cousin Alice, Miss Jordan, read us some stories and poetry. First of all, she sang us such nice old songs about 'Mary, Mary, quite contrary,' 'Little Boy Blue,' and 'I saw Three Ships come Sailing,' and then she went on reading poetry. She read us the 'Ancient Mariner,' and 'Sister Helen,' and I sat on her knee; but Hals wouldn't sit on his mother's, because he said people were looking, and boys had better sit on their own chairs. And 'Sister Helen' was quite real, and made me feel creepy, creepy. It was all about two sisters—they hated some one, and made an image, and they dug pins into it, and then they repeated bad words, and the person for whom it was meant got iller and iller and died; and Hals and me we liked it."

So, chattering all the way, Bess and I regained the house.

"Will there be cake—my favourite cake?" inquired Bess, "the one that Hals likes best of all, with apricot jam and chocolate on the top?"

"Yes," I answered, "and Auguste has promised to make it himself. But only one helping. You must try and be wise, little girl."

"I must try," said Bess, but not very hopefully.

Half an hour later and Hals arrived, without Fräulein Schliemann. We all felt relieved; the two children embraced hurriedly, as if life was all too short to get in all the fun of an afternoon spent in each other's company; and then Bess said, "You can go now," sharply to the little maid who had brought him over. "We don't want to be unkind, but we want to be quite, quite alone, please;" then, thinking that she had not been quite courteous, Bess ran impetuously out of the room. "Poor thing!" she explained to me a minute after, "she must read, because she cannot play; she cannot help it;" and Bess gave Jane a story-book.

"You will find that very amusing," I heard her say through the open door. "It is all about a naughty girl, but she couldn't help being naughty, 'cause it was her nature."

Then Jane went up to the nursery, and a minute later Bess and Harry bounced off together. Before leaving me she whispered something into his ear.

An hour later and Fremantle rang the bell for tea.

After a few moments of waiting Bess and Hals reappeared. They whispered loudly, but I pretended not to hear what they said, for Bess told me with flashing eyes that they had a great, great secret.

"The greatest secret, Mum Mum, that we ever had in our lives."

Their faces looked scarlet, and as to their hands, it is hard to say of what colour they were originally. It was, however, Bess's special *fête*, so I said nothing tactless about cleanliness, nor did I allude to whispering being against the canons of good manners; for there are moments when a mother should have eyes not to see, and ears not to hear, and as a wise friend once said to me, "half the wisdom of life is knowing when to be indulgent."

I need not have feared any excess on the part of the children as regarded the cake and the jam, for they hardly ate any, and Auguste's *chef d'œuvre* had only two small slices cut out of it.

Bess, I saw, was under the influence of some great excitement. She could hardly sit still a moment, and fidgeted on her chair repeatedly, till I feared she would topple backwards, chair and all.

At last tea was over, and grace was said, and the two children, breathless, and absorbed, begged leave to go off.

"Yes," I answered, "but not out of doors; for, see, it is raining, and I promised your mother, Hals, that you should not get wet."

"Oh no, it's nothing to do with puddles," cried Bess. "But, mum, may I take some pins from your pincushion? Nurse won't let me have as many as I want. And then will you say that nobody—nobody is to go near us?"

"Very well," I answered, "only don't do anything that is really wrong."

Bess avoided my gaze, and did not answer, and a minute later I heard the two children scuttle up the

newel staircase, and shortly after heard the muffled sound of voices in the old tower of the Abbey that a Lawley is said to have erected in the middle of the seventeenth century.

About half an hour after, the children returned to me in the chapel hall. Bess, I noticed, looked white and fagged, and both children seemed exhausted by their play, whatever it was, so I made them sit quiet, fetched my embroidery, and began to tell them a fairy-story. I meandered along the paths of fiction. I fear my story had but little plot, but it had fiery dragons, wild beasts, a fairy prince, and a beautiful fairy princess, and, in the background, a wicked ogre. And as I talked, the children sat entranced.

"You see," I said, as I heard the front-door bell ring, and heard the tramp of horses outside, "the prince was to have everything, all that his heart could wish—dogs, the golden bow and arrows, the azure ball, and the deathless crimson rose—as long as he restrained his temper, and never gave way to fits of violent passion. But if he swore at his old nurse, Ancoretta, or struck the goat-herd, Fritz, or even pinched the goose-girl, Mopsa, palace, dogs, bow, ball and rose were all to disappear like a flash of lightning, and he was to become again the poor little bare-legged village lad. Then the princess was to be carried off by fiery dragons, and never return till he, Florizel, had been able to grow good and pitiful again, and to do some lowly, humble service to some poor old dame that everybody else despised, and was unkind to."

At this point of my story, Fremantle entered and announced the carriage.

"Go on, go on," cried the children in one breath. "We want to hear what happened!"

But I answered, shaking my head, "How Prince Florizel was rude to his tutor, ungrateful to his old nurse, and beat his faithful foster-brother, Fritz, is another story, as Mr. Kipling would say; and all this you must wait to hear in the second volume of my mind, which will appear on Easter Monday, when Hals shall come over, if his mother can spare him, and we three will all sail off in fairy barks with silken sails to the far and happy land of Fancy."

So Harry departed, attended by Jane, and Bess sat on in silence looking hard into the fire, and then early, and of her own accord, pleaded fatigue and slipped off to bed.

Just as I was finishing dinner I saw old Nurse Milner standing in the doorway.

"Nothing wrong, nurse?" I asked, starting up.

"Nothing very wrong," answered old Nana, cautiously; "leastways, Miss Bess is not ill, but she seems out of sorts and won't say her prayers to-night, and will keep throwing herself about, till I think she's bound to fall out of bed. I have asked her what's the matter, but she's as secret as a state door. She and Master Harry have been up to some tricks, I'll be bound, for I don't hold to children playin' by themselves, as if they were nothing but lambkins in a meadow. You can't tell what they won't be up to, but this you may be sure of, to childers left by themselves, mischief is natural sport." And old Nana glared, and made me feel very small.

"No great harm done this time," I said, and went upstairs.

"What's the matter, little girl?" I asked. I took a little hot, feverish hand and pressed her to tell me why she would not say her prayers.

At first Bess was sullen—turned her head away, and

would not speak; but she could not resist my kiss, and at last confession bubbled up to her lips.

"Mama," she exclaimed vehemently, "I have been wicked, very wicked—wicked as an ogre or a she-dragon. Can you love me really and truly when you know what I've done—really love me again?"

"I am sure I can," I answered, "only tell me. When I know, I can help you."

Bess buried her head against my shoulder, and then rambled on rather incoherently—

"Do you remember what I told you about Hals' birthday—how there wasn't a conjurer but a white dog, and how, after the tricks were done, Miss Jordan read us stories and told us poems? Well, there was one bit of poetry that I wish I had never heard, nor Hals either, and that was Sister Helen, because it has made me very wicked. It has made me think of how I could pay out Fräulein. We both hate her, she does nothing but punish; not punish you to make you good, but to make you horrid. Hals catches it for not washing his hands, for not brushing his hair, for not putting on his coat, for losing his blotting-paper, for dropping his pencil. Everything means a punishment with Fräulein. She pounces on him like a cat, and she has him everywhere." Then, after a pause, Bess began again. "Hals and I thought we would punish her, too—once and for all."

"Yes, Bess," I inquired; "but what did you do?"

"Mum, I was very naughty," replied my little girl, tearfully. "To-day, Hals and I went upstairs, up to the tower, and I got a dustpan and two candle-ends, and we lighted some sticks and some paper in the dustpan—I stole some matches out of papa's room—and then we melted up the wax."

"And then, Bess?"

"Then, when the wax was sticky and horrid, we stuck pins into it, and I said, 'Please, God, let Fräulein die.' And Hals did not want to say it, but I made him, for I said I wouldn't have God angry with only me.

"And then I called out, 'Let her die, God, in horrid pain, like the snake last year that Burbidge killed and that wouldn't die straight off; and then, dear Lord, let her go to hell and be kept there ever afterwards.' But Hals wouldn't say that, because he had heard Parsons, their stud groom, say you must give every beggar a chance, so he bargained that she should come out one day and have some chocolates. To which I said, if the Lord lets her out of hell, it shall be only common chocolates, not like those that Uncle Paul brought me back from Paris. Then Hals agreed, Mum Mum; only he said, for all she was a German woman, the chock was not to be too nasty, seeing that she would only have some once a year.

"Then Hals wanted to go away; but I said he shouldn't till we had done the whole job.

"Then he and I blew out the fire and stamped upon the wax, and it was quite soft and squashy and I pricked my foot; but nurse does not know, for Eliza bathed me to-night, and Eliza did not notice."

"And after that?" I asked.

"Oh," sobbed Bess, "you will be very angry."

"Never mind, go on," I said.

"Then," said Bess, steeled to the point, in a penetrating broken chirp, "after that I told Hals we must say bad words, for I knew that bad words can do a great deal. But Hals couldn't think of any, so I called him a muff and a milksop, and I told him to repeat after me all that I said."

"What did you say?"

"Mama, I called out 'damn' three times."

"My dear, what a dreadful word! How did you know it?"

"Oh, once I heard Uncle Paul say it when he ran a nail in his boot; and once I remembered that Crawley said it when he got his foot caught in a gate-post out riding, and I have never forgotten it. And worse," continued Bess, "I called out, 'hell! hell! hell!' and then I was frightened; but I didn't let Hals see it, or he would have said girls were only funks after all."

"Well, little girl, you have done wrong, and you know it; for it is always wicked to curse anybody, and mean to pray that some evil may befall them. But," I added, as I saw Bess's tear-stained little face, "I am sure you're sorry; for think what a terrible thing it would be if anything dreadful happened to Fräulein, and if you thought your wicked words had brought it about."

Bess's composure by this time had quite broken down, she broke out into a passionate fit of tears.

"Why don't you beat me, why don't you shake me, or do something?" she cried.

"My poor little girl," I answered, and I took her in my arms and prayed God that He would purify my little girl's heart, and give her a pure white soul.

At last Bess's sobs grew less violent, and she lay quiet.

"Do you feel better now?" I asked.

"Yes," came back from Bess; "for the curses, Mum Mum, seem to have gone out of the room and to be dying away. Before you came, the whole place seemed full of them, and eyes, great horrid eyes, seemed to be looking at me everywhere, and I couldn't rest, do what I would."

“Now you can sleep,” I said with a smile, “and I will sit by you till all the evil spirits are gone, and guard you.”

So I sat on without speaking, and held Bess’s hands till the dustman of children’s fancy came with his sand-bags and threw the sand of kindly oblivion into my little maiden’s eyes, and she fell asleep. Then softly and as delicately as I could, I untwined the little network of fingers that had twined themselves so cunningly around mine, and gave little Bess a parting kiss as I glided out of the room.

When I returned to the chapel hall I found a letter from Constance. In a postscript she told me that the idea of the quilt was taking form.

“From ‘Gerard’s Herbal’ I have chosen,” she wrote, “the King’s Chalice, or Serins’ Cade; the Dalmatian Cap; the Guinny Hen; the Broad-leaved Saffron; Goat’s Rue, or the Herb of Grace; Ladies’ Smock; Golden Mouse-ear; Solomon’s Seal; Star of Bethlehem; Sops in Wine; Ales-hoof; Wolf’s Bane and Golden Rod. I give you all the old names. On a scroll I propose round the quilt or ‘bed hoddin,’ as Shropshire folks would call it, to work wise and beautiful words about sleep;” and her letter ended with an appeal to me, to help her, by finding some apt saws and quotations for this purpose. Of course I will; what a delightful excuse for looking through the poets, I said to myself.

I looked at the old Dutch clock. Ten minutes, I said, before going to bed. Ten minutes, ten golden minutes, when it is not a duty to do anything, or a matter of reproach to be idle. The fire was dying softly down. I saw all faintly by the dim light of the lamp—the dark panelling, the two Turners, the old

Bohemian bench, the stern outline of the altar, and outside the still night.

"Are you not afraid to sit by yourself?" a somewhat foolish friend once asked me. "I should be terribly alarmed of ghosts."

"Afraid of holy spirits?" I remember answering. "No crime is associated with Wenlock. There is only an atmosphere of prayer and saintliness there, a fragrance from holy lives rising up to God in perpetual intercession; surely such thoughts should make nobody uneasy or unhappy."

"I don't know," my friend had replied. "But lancet windows, I know, always make me creepy—and living in a church," she added inconsequently, "would be almost as bad as having a house with a curse. I am sure I should always be dreaming of finding a walled-up skeleton, or something mediæval and uncomfortable."

At which we had both laughed, and I confessed that I liked being left to my angels and my prayers, and that it was good to believe that one had a soul, and that all the forces of God's world were not comprised in steam, the Press, and electricity.

Then, as I sat on, my mind reverted to the little child, sleeping, I hoped, peacefully upstairs. "Poor little impetuous Bess," I said to myself, "I trust some day she will not break her heart against the bars of earth. She wills, and wants, so strongly when the fit is on her, and then afterwards, remorse, sorrow, and despair."

The child is the father of the man, and in my mind's eye I saw my little maiden as she would be in womanhood—dark, passionate, devoted, generous, impulsive, with a golden heart, but self-willed and not easy to guide. Heaven grant her pathway may not lie across many

briars, and that I may be able to protect, and water the flowers, in the garden of her soul.

All education is a hard matter, and we parents are often like children groping in the dark. It takes all that mother and father can do, friends and contemporaries, and, after all, in Burbidge's homely language, is often "a parlous and weedy job." We so often give the wrong thing to our children, and, what is worse, the wrong thing out of love and affection. We so often, as Montaigne wrote, "stuff the memory and leave the conscience and the understanding unfurnished and void." We are too often knowing only in what makes present knowledge, "and not at all in what is past, no more than which is to come." We do not think sufficiently of the development and growth of character. Above all, few fathers and mothers try simply to make their children good men and women, without which all is lost; for, as the great essayist said, "all other knowledge is hurtful to him or her who has not the science of goodness."

We must not be afraid of emotion, at least, not of right emotion; nor must we be shy of offering our highest tributes of admiration to honour, virtue, and real greatness. We must not be ashamed to mention honourable deeds, and we must teach our children that honourable failure is better than dishonourable success.

Life is not all an armchair for youth to rest in, or a country of roast larks even for the youngest, and there are higher and better things even than having "a good time." Such were the thoughts that flashed through my brain as I lighted my yellow Broseley-ware candlestick and went up the oak stairs to bed.

The next day, as soon as I had finished breakfast, I

got a message from our old gardener, Burbidge, to the effect that he wished to speak to me, and that at once.

I found the old man in the long lower passage of the monks.

"What is it?" I asked. "Nothing wrong in the garden?"

"Not so bad as that; but 'tis about my brother as I've come."

"Your brother, Burbidge?" I repeated. "I did not even know that you had one."

"Well," replied Burbidge, "'tisin't often as I speak of him, and 'tis twenty year agone since I've seen 'im, for when folks be hearty yer needn't trot round the country like a setter to see 'em; but now as Benjamin is old and in danger, I think as I'd better have a day off, and go and see him."

"Where does he live?" I asked.

"At Clun, just outside the town," was Burbidge's reply. "He's been there these seventy year, and more. When he were quite a lad he lived at Bridgnorth, but over seventy year he have a-lived with Farmers Benson—first with Farmer James, then with his son Joshua, and lastly with his grandson, Farmer Caleb. Benjamin he have a-buried two wives and thirteen childer, and the berrial of the lot have a-come upon him like tempest in summer. But he have allus kept hale and hearty—till this year."

"Has Benjamin been able to work all these years?" I inquired.

"Of course he 'ave," replied Burbidge, scornfully. "Of course he did, till he war *overlooked*."

"Overlooked?" I said, and turned to Burbidge puzzled.

After a pause, Burbidge, seeing that I did not

realize the full importance of his statement, repeated, "Overlooked, and by a *black* witch too." And then he lowered his voice and added, "For all their education, parsons, newspapers and what not, there be black witches, and some of 'em has hearts as black as hell, and can suck the very life out of a fellow."

"But surely your brother doesn't believe that now?"

"Doesn't he," answered Burbidge. "My brother knows better than to disbelieve in devils and witches. You don't catch him going against the Word of God like that. Yer might as well try to stir a puddin' with an awl, or to repeat a verse of Hebrew under a moonless sky, as tear up the old belief in the old Shropshire folk. The devil he won't go out of Shropshire for all the papers daily, and weekly, as ever town people read or write; no, not even to make place for trains, and motors. He 'ave his place here, and he'll keep his wenches, the witches, near him."

"But what has happened to your brother?" I asked, as soon as I could get a word in.

"Why, just the same as has been happening for years, and thousands of years to others, and which will happen, whether Shropshire be ruled by a king or a queen, and which be Gospel truth whatever they say, and which may come dwang-swang to any Christian man."

And thereupon I heard the story of how old Benjamin Burbidge had been bewitched. I listened amazed, for the tale was more like an incident in some witch's trial in James I.'s time than a story of modern life.

"Yer must know," continued our old gardener, "as Benjamin war waggoner at Bottomly Farm—and he

have a-been so for years and years. And a fine team his war—a team of roans and all mares—to get foals off at the close. Well, and fat they war, and for all he war old, horse and harness Benjamin minded surely. His horses were to him like gold, and he put in elbow grease as if he war a lusty lad of twenty in minding 'em. Well, one day his granddaughter Sally, who keeps house for him, war mixin' meal for the poultry, when up comes Becky Smout as they call her there, an old gangrel body, weazen, dark as walnut juice, and the look of a vixen in her eyes. Some folks say she came to Shropshire on a broomstick, and some seventy year ago from Silverton on the Clee-side. 'Tis a land of witches that Clee Hill, and allus have been a stronghold of the devil, as old Parson Jackson used to say. When Becky saw the poultry meat, her belly craved for it. Her held out both hands ape-like and her cried out, 'Let it be a howgy sup, my wench.' But Sal war'in a temper it seems. 'Let be,' she sang out; 'dost think I've nought to do but to cram thy belly as if thee were a yule-tide hog;' and folks say with both bowl, and spoon, Sal flung out in a fanteag, because it seems Benjamin had promised her for her own gew-gaws what her could make by the sale of the fat hens and the widdies come Christmas. And Becky her let her rage and never, they say, spoke one single word, but looked at her darkly, speered round, and wrote some devil's characters in the dust outside the door; and as she passed down the lane they heard her laughin', laughin' like an ecall on an April morning, fit to split her sides in half. The next morning, when Sal got out to feed her poultry, she picked up the speckled hen, and a morning or two arter she found the yellow cock all stiff and cold with a kind of white froth round his

mouth. And after that, her war all of a tremble, war Sal. Her began to hear voices, and to see things as folks shouldn't see, and to hear bits of noises everywhere. And a kind of sweat seemed to ooze out from her hands and feet, and her felt cold and hot all to a time, and the doctor's physic did her no good, nor could any of Mrs. Benson's draughts ease her. And they sent her off to the sea to stay with a sister at Rhyl; but Sal her came back queerer than ever, and her wouldn't speak, but would sit gaping and blinking as if her couldn't mak' nothin' out, nor understood nought. And all the while Becky would prance about aunty-pranty, and speer over the hedge, and laugh and jabber and talk a heathen tongue."

"What is that?" I asked.

"*Why, their own tongue.*"

"What is it like?"

"Oh, never you ask, marm," replied Burbidge sternly. "No pure-minded woman ever spoke that tongue, but witches they take to it like widdies" (ducklings) "to a horse pond. And for all Ben had cried 'Fudge,' and 'You don't catch an old fox nappin',' as he did at the first when Sal were overtaken, he got mighty fidgety and couldn't stop still. He took to dropping his pipe, wud begin a story and then wud break off and laugh afore the joke was come, and his speech got queer like Sal's, and at last he could bear it no longer, and he went off to Becky. And he took a golden guinea that he had had off the first Mrs. Benson, her as they called madam, for folks said that she war a parson's daughter, and that she had given him for pulling her lad out of a brook over seventy years agone, and that he valued like the apple of his eye, and he pulled out the guinea from his waistcoat

pocket and he said 'This be yourn,' to Becky, 'if for the love of God you'll take the curse off me and mine.' But her wudn't, wudn't Becky, and her only laughed and laughed, same as an ecall in the Edge wood. And then Ben ran out frightened, so that his legs seemed to give under him, same as a hop shoot that has no stake, and he came home jabbering, crying, and laughing like a frightened child, and nobody could do nought with him.

"Farmer Benson, he tried to do what he could as *maister*; but Benjamin had lost all respect, and laughed at him same as if he had been his gossip. Nor could any of his childers bring him to reason, neither Frank nor Moses, his grown sons who live at Wolverhampton, and have families of their own. So at last Mrs. Benson, her has a-wrote to me, to come and try what I can do. And seeing that Ben and I we be true brothers, and he so down in his luck, I thought as I'd like to go and see him, and look in at a Craven Arms bit of a show of a few spring things, and so get a holiday and a sight of poor Ben at the same time, if so be I can be free to-day."

I assured Burbidge that he was quite free, as he expressed it, and I trusted that he would find his brother better than he expected. "Only make him believe that Becky Smout is an impostor," I said, "and has no real power to injure him or his granddaughter, and all will go well."

But at this advice Burbidge solemnly shook his head.

"They ideas does for the Quality," he grumbled, "but workin' folks know better. Us wouldn't hold such creeds if they warn't deadly real." And so saying, my old friend clumped down the mediæval passage, and I was left thinking how little Shropshire was

changed, in spite of board schools and daily papers, from the Shropshire of the Stuarts.

A minute later and I heard a child's voice close to my elbow, and saw a little girl, Susie Rowe by name. "You here, Susie?" I said, and asked the reason of her visit.

I was told "that grandam was but poorly," and Susie begged for a bit of tea and a drop of broth. "Grandam doesn't know," added Susie, blushing, "for her don't hold to begging; but Betty Beaman, the old body what lives with her, her says, 'Hasten up, my maid, and bring her something nice from the Abbey.'"

"Of course," I answered, "Mrs. Harley shall have anything I have." And I called to Auguste to fill the basket with good things.

He filled a little can with milk, got a packet of tea and filled a gallipot with *crème de Volaille* from the larder. Susie passed me a few minutes later, weighed down by her basket, but all smiles, and she promised she would tell her grandmother to expect a visit from me in the course of the afternoon.

Just before luncheon my little maiden appeared. She was sad, and silent, and I did not allude to what had taken place yesterday; but at luncheon-time I told her I was going to Homer, and invited her to ride Jill whilst I walked.

It was a lovely afternoon, sweet and almost warm, but there was little sunshine. All was enveloped in a soft grey mist. We walked along the lanes, Jill nosing me at intervals for lumps of sugar.

Mouse was of the party, and ran backwards and forwards very pleased and gay. A pony is always a pleasure to a dog; it seems to give state and importance to a walk. Tramp and Tartar scampered

ahead, and sniffed and skurried round, and up, and down the high banks that skirted the track.

At length we reached the lane that turns off from the Wenlock Road, and Farley Dingle, and we stood on the top of the edge before dipping down into the valley to the little hamlet below known as Homer.

I stopped to look at, and admire the view; even in the subdued light of a grey winter's day it was enchantingly beautiful. The little cottages of Homer clustered in a circle at my feet, whilst round them nestled orchards of apple trees and damsons, which last would soon be out in a mist of white blossom, like a maze of stars on a frosty night. Far away I saw Harley church, the woods of Belswardine, the smoke of Shrewsbury lying like a mantle of vapour on the distant plain, and to the west rose the great hills of Carodoc and the Long Mynde, whilst immediately before me stretched the ill-fated spot known as Banister's Coppice.

It was here, according to old tradition, that the unfortunate Duke of Buckingham, in Richard III.'s reign, was betrayed by his faithless steward at his house at Shinewood. The story ran that the duke's cause did not prosper, and that his Welsh allies melted away, so that he, finding himself hard pressed by the royal forces, and not able to collect fresh troops, hurriedly disbanded his followers and fled to the house of his servant Banister, or Banaistre, as he was called by some of the old chroniclers.

Buckingham thought, having conferred great benefits on his servant, that he could count upon his loyalty; but Banister was tempted by the great reward, £1000, offered by the king for his master's apprehension, and told "Master Mytton," then sheriff, where he was concealed.

The duke, according to the old story, lay in a ditch near the house, on the outskirts of the coppice, disguised, it is said, in the smock of a countryman, and was arrested at night by John Mytton, who came over from the old hall at Shipton, with a force of armed men. When Buckingham knew that his arrest was due to the treachery of his servant, he broke forth and cursed his faithless steward in the most awful, and terrible manner. He cursed his goings in, and goings out, the air he breathed, the liquor he drank, and the very bread he ate, and with the same curse, he cursed all his family. According to tradition, they all ended miserably.

An old writer declares, "Shortly after Banister had betrayed his master, his son and heir waxed mad, and died in a boar's sty; his eldest daughter, of excellent beauty, was suddenly stricken of a foul leprosy; his second son became very marvellously deformed in his limbs, whilst his youngest son was drowned 'and strangled' in a very small puddle of water. And Banister himself, when he became of extreme old age, was found guilty of a murder, and was only saved by the intervention of the clergy, to whom he had paid large sums. As for the £1000, the king," says the same old writer, "gave him not one farthing, saying 'that a servant who had been so untrue to so good a master, would be false to all other.'"

Shinewood House—for the old manor of the duke's time has gone—I could not see, but I knew the place, and as I looked across wood and meadow, all the old story and its tragedy came back to me. Some writers say that Buckingham was executed at Shrewsbury, but Shakespeare and Sir Thomas More declare that he was executed at Salisbury on the feast of All Souls.

Bess and I walked down the cart-track and looked below. Five or six donkeys were browsing on the scant herbage, for every one at Homer keeps a donkey, and the common name of the hamlet is Donkeyland. After a few minutes' walking, we left the main track, and made our way to a little homestead that nestles close against the hill, and is surrounded by a bower of fruit trees. As we turned through the wicket a band of dark-eyed children quitted the little school and greeted us. The children looked as if they belonged to another race than those at Much Wenlock. They had dark, almost black eyes, and swarthy skins. I have been told that in the end of the eighteenth century a gang of gipsies came and settled at Homer, built huts for themselves, married and settled there; and that is why the good folks of Homer seem of a different race from the rest of the neighbourhood. I paused before knocking at the cottage door, and begged Fred, the groom who had followed us, to take my little maiden for a ride, and bring her back in half an hour.

"Mayn't I come in?" asked Bess.

"Not to-day, for Mrs. Harley is really ill," I answered. "Take the dogs, and come back presently."

Bess and her pony, followed by Tramp and Tartar, vanished, and old Betty opened the cottage door. All was irreproachably clean. The brass warming-pan over the chimney piece shone like gold, and the old-fashioned dresser was garnished with spotless blue and white china. There was a mug or two of lustre-ware, a few embroidered samplers on the walls, and a pot or two of budding geraniums behind the windows. Upon the hob a copper kettle hissed gaily.

I asked after Mrs. Harley, the owner of the cottage. But Betty shook her head. "She 'ave a-heard the

Lord's call," she replied; "but she's ready—been ready this forty years, and her wants to go."

A minute later I found myself by my old friend's bedside. She had a wonderful face, this old village woman. Through it shone the inner light which once to see is never to forget. I sat down by her, at a sign from Betty, and asked her how she did.

For all answer Mrs. Harley smiled.

"I fear you suffer?"

"That does not matter," came back from her, "for I am going home."

The room was a plain little room with old oak beams across the ceiling, the covering on the bed was old and worn, there were only the barest necessities of life, and yet as I sat watching my old friend, I could almost hear the sound of angels' wings.

In spite of pain, long nights of sleeplessness, and a long and weary illness, my old friend's face glowed with happiness, and in her eyes was that perfect look of peace, which remains as a beacon to every pilgrim who has ever met it. I offered to read to Mrs. Harley, but she declined.

"No readin', dear, for I can hear Him myself. There's no need now to speak or pray, I'm goin' Home. I, what be so tired." Then she thanked me for coming, and asked me with an ethereal smile about "the little one. Mak' her grow up worth havin'," she added seriously. "Every child is made in the image of God, and it isn't parents as ought to deface His image. 'Tisn't only book learning, and fine dressing, as will make her a lady, but you'll do yer best," and she patted my hand affectionately.

Then my old friend began to talk of her past life, of her early marriage, "fifty years ago," with a right

God-fearing man ; of her happy married life, and then, calmly and bravely, of her joyous and approaching death.

"I am going Home," were her last words, and I shall never forget the exquisite certainty of her tone, as I left the room and followed Betty downstairs.

A minute later, and Betty and I found ourselves in the little kitchen below.

"I shall miss her terrible," she said in a husky voice. "Nell and I, years and years ago, were scholars together when old Madam Challoner taught in the little white house yonder, afore the new school was built. We growed up and we married, the same year. Her got a good man ; I got a beauty, and a bad one. When Harley died, he left his missus the cottage, garden, a few fields, and a tight bit of money. Soon after her was left a widow, I went to see her, for Marnwood Beaman, my man, he fell off a waggon, dead drunk, and was killed, and I was left without a penny. I couldn't do much, for I had got cripply ever since I had got the rheumatics, so I made up my mind it war to the poor-house I war bound. One day (when I had stomached a resolution to carry this through, and it costs the poorest body a lot to do), I went, as I said, to see Nell afore I spoke to the overseer.

"When I got in, Nell, her comed up to me and her says, 'What ails thee, Betty?' for my eyes were red and bulgy. Then I told her what war on my mind, and that for all my cottage war a poor place, it went sadly against the grain to leave it and to have a mistress to knopple over me, and give me orders same as if I war a little maid at school.

"Then," added Betty, "Nell her brought me the greatest peace as I have ever felt.

"Her said, with one of her grand smiles, and sometimes, for all her war but poor folk, Nell looked a born duchess, but with a bit of an angel too, 'Don't you think, Betty, of leaving and goin' to the poor-house or any other institution, but stay you at home with me. Pick up your duds and us two will live together, for my daughter be married.

"'I don't want exactly a serving wench, nor a daughter, nor a sister, but some one as is betwixt and between, and a bit of all three. Thee can work a bit, give thee time, and we can crack an old tale together after tea; I shan't be timid with thee, nor thee of me. Us shall be just two old folks goin' down the hill together—and the getting down shall be natural, and friendly. I can take thy hand, and thou canst take mine.'

"And her did give me a hand," exclaimed old Betty, warmly, "a hand that has kape me safe all these years; and I bless the Lord for such a true and good friend."

We sat on in silence, and I could not but think how sweet, and loyal, had been the friendship of these two old people. Suddenly Betty got up and poked the fire.

"Last time as yer war callin'," she said, "yer asked me, mam, what I could say about that Nanny Morgan, her as war a known witch. Nell won't name her, for her says Nan was given up to the devil, and all his works, and that her has something else to think of. But since yer are wishful to know, and the little lady is not here, I'll tell yer what I can.

"Nanny Morgan was the daughter of Richard Williams, and she war born and bred in a little house up at Westwood, on the way to Presthope. Yer must often have seen the place, as yer go to Five Chimneys. Nan war a fine, strapping lass when first I remembered her. Dark, tall, with steel-grey eyes. Her got into

trouble when quite a maid for having a finger in the pie of robbing Mrs. Powell at Bourton. Her was tried at Shrewsbury for the robbery, and lay in prison, they said, a long time. When her got out of prison her own people wouldn't harbour her, they said, and she went and lived with the gipsies. There she learnt card tricks, tellin' of fortunes, and took to wandering and unchristian ways. Us didn't see her at Wenlock for a long while, but one day she turned up at Wenlock Market on a Monday, and told a friend that her had taken 'dad's old house' and meant to settle down and bide in the old place.

"Her called herself then Nanny Morgan, though who Morgan war I never rightly knew, most like some tinker man. Anyway, her went to Westwood, and there her lived, told fortunes by cards and by hand-readin', sold love drinks, and was hired out as a curser—and of all the cursers, there war none that could curse with Nan. For her cursed the goin's in and the goin's out of folks, the betwixt and between, the side-ways and slip-slaps, till, as they said, there wasn't foot-room for folks to stand on, nor a thimbleful of air for a creature to breathe, that hard could Nanny curse.

"She was terrible to meet," continued Betty. "Once as I war walkin' back to Homer after marketing at Wenlock, I looked up and Nan was full in my road, straight against the sky. How her had comed there, I don't know, but there her war, terrible fierce and sudden, and her great eyes seemed to look through and through me, and I fair quailed before her, as they say a partridge does afore a hawk. Every one war feared of Nanny," added old Betty, "for they felt before her as innocent as a child, and what war there as she couldn't do to them?"

"Nan lived on at Westwood and none dared say her

nay, or to refuse her ought, and all the while she went on practising devil's arts, till her got her death."

"How was that?" I asked.

"Well, it war years ago." And Betty thought for a moment and then added, "'Twas in the year 1857 that Nan got her deserts.

"There war a young lodger as had a bed at Nan's, and Nan took to him terrible, and the lovinger her got the more he held back; and the witch played with 'um same as a cat does with a mouse, and wouldn't let 'un off to marry his own sweetheart. So one evening, he went into Wenlock, and he bought a knife, and he stole back to her house, and she called him soft like a throstle. Then while she stirred her pot, he stabbed her to get free of her love philters. When Mr. Yates, who war mace-bearer and barber, comed up, he found Nan, they said, lying in a pool of blood, but they durst not undress her for fear of getting witch's blood, and we all know that that is a special damnation.

"Her led a bad life, did Nan," pursued old Betty; "her kept a swarm of cats, and one she called Hell-blow and another Satan's Smile, and her had a box of toads to work mysteries with, and these, they said, would hop at night, and leer and talk familiar as spirits, and besides these, there war a pack of wicked books. You yourself, mam, have her card-table where her used to sit. One leg of it higher than the rest, and the ledge below, was where her wickedest toad used to perch—it as they called 'Dew,' and that had been bred up on communion bread, to reveal secrets. Sometimes, I've heard, Nan would fall a-kissin' that toad and whisper to it all sorts of unclean spells. I couldn't abear the table. It might fall to speaking itself at nights, and then the devil only knows what it would say."

There was a pause, and then old Betty went on to say—

“After Nan war buried, the books one and all war brought down to the Falcon’s Yard Inn and burnt publicly. So that war her end, and a wickeder woman never lived.”

As the sound of Betty’s last words died away, I heard the noise of horses’ feet gaily trotting up the lane.

“That will be my Bess,” I said, “and as the twilight is beginning, I must return.” Then I begged that Susie might come and tell me if there is anything I could send for Mrs. Harley, and we passed out of the door.

As we neared the wicket, Bess called out, “Look, look, and see what I have found. Three snowdrops all white, a hazel nut-tail, and a nice sticky bud of a horse-chestnut; but never mind anything but the snowdrops, for they bring luck, Nana says.”

I took the first flowers of the year; what a dazzling white they were! And I recalled, as I held them, the old legend of the “white purification” as it was once called.

“And to think,” said Betty, smiling and noting our joy over the flowers, “as I haven’t a blow to give my pretty,” and she smiled at Bess; “but us has nought in blow, save a bud or two of the damsons, and I dursn’t pull it, for folks say, him as pulls fruit blossom deserves the same as her as burns bread-crumbs, and I wouldn’t bring her any ill-chance.”

Then I passed out of the little cottage precincts. I saw old Betty still holding the gate, a dim figure with a red shawl. Bess blew her a kiss, the dogs barked furiously; even Mouse joined in her deep bell notes, and once more we were under way on our own homeward journey.

A soft grey mist gathered round us, with the growing darkness. All was very still after a few minutes, and the only sound that we heard was the baying of a dog in the distance at some lonely farm.

Far away in the west gleamed a golden light. Once we passed a brown figure of some labouring man returning to his cottage, and as we neared a thicket of budding blackthorn we were greeted by the voice of a throstle singing his evening hymn. I carried my flowers reverently, for were they not the first promise of spring, the smile, as it were, of the scarce known year?

"Mum," said Bess, as I lifted her off Jill's back, "could you spare me one of the snowdrops to keep in my own nursery?"

I nodded acquiescence.

"Because," pursued the child, "I should like one. Just one. It would help me, I think, to keep away eyes, and bad words, and perhaps might make me good and happy. Nan says they used to bring in snowdrops to make the children good, let me try, too."

CHAPTER III

MARCH

“ To birdes and beestes
That no blisse ne knoweth,
And wild worms in wodes
Through wynter thou them grievest,
And makest hem welneigh meke,
And mylde for defaute,
And after thou sendest hem somer,
That is hiz sovereign joye,
And blisse to all that be,
Both wilde and tame.”

Vision of Piers Ploughman.

THE winds of heaven were blowing, blowing ; dust was flying on the roads. The old saying that “ a peck is worth a king’s ransom ” returned to my mind. February fill-dyke had filled the springs and the streams, and now March with his gay sun, and wild winds was drying them as hard as he could. How pleasant it was to see the sun again ! He had been almost a stranger in the cold dark months of the young year. Yet early as it was, Phœbus was proud and glorious and at his fiery darts all nature seemed to begin and start life afresh.

Man, beast, and bird, all felt the mysterious influence of spring, whilst up the stems of all the trees and plants, the sap began to mount again.

I woke up early, but the world had already commenced its work, golden rays of sunlight were pouring

into the windows and I found, too, that the restlessness of nature had seized me also, so I went and peeped out of an old chamber that commanded the eastern garden.

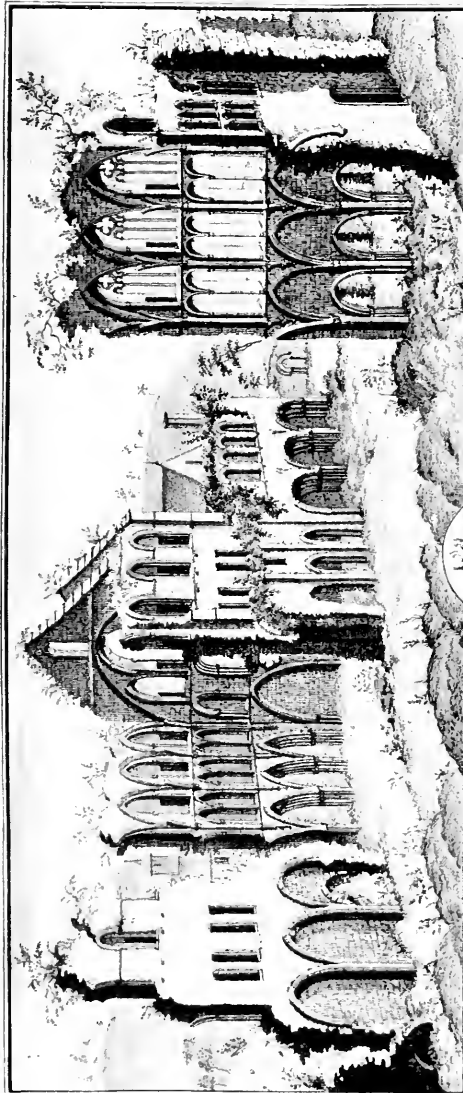
Outside, there was a sense of great awakening—the sun flashed merrily down on the frosty turf, and the congealed drops were already fast disappearing into the ground. Starlings hurried, hither and thither, like iridescent jewels, snowdrops lifted their heads and waved them triumphantly in the breeze. The quice, as Shropshire folk call wood-pigeons, I heard cooing in their sweet persuasive note in a distant chestnut, and as I fastened back the window the musical hum of bees sporting in the crocuses, caught my ear.

From the end of the border ascended the fragrance of a clump of violets. How sweet is the return of spring, I murmured, and how wonderful. What a joy, one of the joys we can never grow tired of, or too old to feel afresh each year. Winter seems so long, and the awakening and sweet summer all too short.

I returned to my room, dressed quickly, and then went out into the garden.

Life, life seemed everywhere. The wild birds were singing, calling, flying backwards and forwards and seeking food. The speckled storm-cock, as they call the missel thrush in Shropshire, was singing gloriously on the top branch of a gnarled apple tree, whilst from a bush of ribes as I passed along, a frightened blackbird lumbered away with his angry protesting rattle. How handsome he is, the cock blackbird, with his plumage of raven hue, and his golden dagger of a beak. In the twilight how irresistible is the deep regret of his song. It is a song, sweet, tender, full of old memories, and brings back in its subtle melancholy, dear faces, and the touch of dear lost hands

THE SOUTH WEST VIEW OF WENLOCK ABBY, IN THE COUNTY OF SALOP.



WENLOCK ABBY, SALOP. The abbey was founded by King Edward the Confessor, and was one of the most important religious houses in the kingdom. It was destroyed by the monks themselves in 1538, and the ruins were sold to the Earl of Shrewsbury. The abbey was rebuilt by the Earl of Shrewsbury in the 16th century, and the ruins were again destroyed by the Earl of Shrewsbury in the 17th century. The ruins were again destroyed by the Earl of Shrewsbury in the 18th century, and the ruins were again destroyed by the Earl of Shrewsbury in the 19th century.

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WENLOCK ABBEY IN 1731.

From Buck's View.

that helped and loved us once. The blackbird's note is quite different from the thrush; the thrush's song is all pure joy, and glad expectation. He sings of morning, and all his notes are in a major key. He chants of wholesome work, of brave endeavour, and of spring gladness. His rapture is like that of the early poets. No note of sorrow dulls his glorious morning. Joy, health, happiness, these are the keynotes of his rhapsody—and we are grateful to him as we are grateful for the sunshine, for the laughter of children, and for the scent of flowers. It is hard to say which song we love best. But why choose, for are not both God's feathered choristers, and their songs our earliest melodies of childhood?

How feverishly busy everything was that morning, and how seriously all living things took the annual dawn of life. The birds on the lawns were pecking, pecking everywhere, finding food and seeking materials for the future homes of their young.

I stood quite still, against an ivied wall, and watched an old thrush bring up a fat snail in her beak. In a second she had cracked the shell upon a monastic stone, and was feasting greedily on the contents. When she had flown away, I examined the bits of broken shell, and discovered that they were of a dull brownish colour, and that the snail was one of the kind that the Clugniac monks are said to have brought with them from France, when Roger the great Earl of Montgomery, brought over his band of monks from La Charité sur Loire, and founded his monastery at Wenlock soon after the Conquest.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth century snails of this kind, "Escargots" as they were then termed, and still are called in France, were constantly used as a remedy "for restoring a right motion of the heart, and for

casting out melancholy." A cure, it is said, was also wrought by a "cunning jelly" made from them, and this was supposed to be "proper" food for those who "dwindered" or who were "subject to a weak, or queasy stomach."

In the fourteenth century, I have been told, snails were sold at Bath and in other towns in the west, to such as had consumptive tendencies. Knowing this, and seeing how much escargots were used in the Middle Ages, not only as a delicacy by the monks and nobles, but also in medicine with herbs, presumably amongst the poor, it is curious now, the horror that exists at the thought of eating either snails or frogs. At first, when I gave some dinners to the very needy, they would hardly dare come for them, and declared that they were sure that in Auguste's ragouts there would be found some lurking, somewhere.

"Us doesn't dare to search in the broth," one old man said, "for us doesn't know what low beasts, slugs, snails, tadpoles, and what not a foreigner mightn't mix in." But now happily they are reassured, and old Ged Bebb told me only last week, "That, for all that they war heathan (the cook men), the meat war good, and proper, and what Christian folks cud eat."

I passed into the old red-walled garden and stopped to admire the long line of brilliant yellow crocuses. They were all aglow in the brilliant sunlight, and stood drawn up like a regiment of soldiers in line. I stood entranced, for each soldier seemed to be holding a lamp, and in each lamp, or cup, the sun was reflected in a wonderful golden glory. It is hardly possible to exaggerate the beauty of golden crocuses in golden sunlight. They seem to fill the world with gladness and to be March's crowning glory. I stopped and looked at my

clumps of crocuses, they were coming up gaily, but were yet hardly in blossom.

Burbidge put in for me strong clumps of Sir Walter Scott, Rizzio, and of beautiful Mont Blanc. All these were pushing up bravely, out of their mother earth. In fact, they were bursting, as Bess calls it, to be out.

A minute later, I turned to inspect my *chionodoxas* and *scillas*. A few were coming into bloom. *Luciliae* had several sprays of delicate china blue and white flowers, and coppery two-blade leaves, and a patch of blue *Scilla Sibirica* had reared already a spray or two of gorgeous ultramarine blossoms; but it was still early in March, and that is the time of the promise of beautiful things, not yet the realization of Flora's *fête*.

As I went by a bush of white *Daphne*, I heard that the bees had discovered this spring delight—they were buzzing quite fiercely round its tiny flowerets. What a perfume the *Daphne* has! What an enchantment of rich odours! The pink bush on the other side of the garden I noted would blossom shortly, but there is quite ten days' difference in the flowering of the two varieties. The white follows "on the feet of snow," as Burbidge expresses it, and the pink, "when the spring has come." Of daffodils there was no sign as yet, save the little hard green spikes, but the purple hellebores were proud in their sombre magnificence. These always seem to me flowers that might fitly have decked the brows of some great enchantress, Morgan le Fay, or the Lady of the Lake. They vary from green to darkest purple, and they seem hardly flowers of gaiety or morning, but rather the shadowy blooms of twilight. Unlike their sister, the beautiful *Helleborus niger*, they will not live, plucked, in water. When gathered, they fade almost instantaneously and hang their heads in spite of salt or

charcoal being added to the water. I have heard it said that if the stalks be cunningly split first, before being put in water, that they will last some time; but I cannot say I have ever found this plan successful, and have come to the conclusion that if you want to see your purple hellebores in beauty, you must go into the garden to do so.

Then, as I walked on, I noted that the white arabis was flowering in places. Such a dear, homely little flower as it is, much loved by the bees who had gathered to it like to a honey jar. As I stood watching "the little brown people," I heard the guttural click-click of the little common wren. What a tiny little bird she is, the Jenny Wren of the old nursery rhyme—"God Almighty's hen," some of the old folk still call her here. It is wonderful to think that so deep a note can come out of so small a body.

Jenny hopped about from twig to twig, gaily enough, cocked her tail, and was, according to Burbidge, as "nimble as ninepence."

Here in Shropshire, in spite of the superstition that she was under special Divine Providence, the wren was often hunted at Yule-tide. Gangs of boys used formerly to chase poor Jenny with sticks, in and out of hedge-rows, and over banks and stones. Particularly did this ignoble sport take place on the sides of the Clee Hills, and on the flanks of the Wrekin. Now, happily, the time of persecution is past, and Jenny no longer suffers ill from the hands of men. Hopping fearlessly near me was the pet robin that I fed through the evil days of snow and frost. How gorgeous he looked, with his scarlet waistcoat, how sleek and plump; and how full and liquid was his great brown eye. I begged Burbidge to leave, as last year, the old iron kettle in the arbour

of honeysuckle, where he and Madam had their nest and reared their offspring last spring. How tame she was, with her little breast of yellowish brown and her liquid great eyes that used to watch me so keenly when I looked down upon her in the kettle. How patiently she sat, and how sweetly he sang to her, amongst the blossoms, his whole throat moving with his trilling rapture. For two years he and "Madam Buttons" have built in the kettle and brought up their nestlings there, and preferred that site to a hole in bank or wall, branch of tree, or to the thick shelter of the yews.

The robin is looked upon in Shropshire as a sacred bird. Folks here believe that some terrible calamity will surely overtake him who robs a nest or kills "God's cock." A poor woman once gravely told me that her little son's arm was withered, "be like," she considered, "that he had robbed a robin's nest."

"Him who slays a robin, may look to his special damnation," an old man once said to me, who had seen what he termed a "gallous lad" throw a stone at one.

"Why thee cannot be content to rob the other birds, and leave God Almighty's fowls alone, I canna' understand," was also an angry remark I once heard addressed by a mother to a seven-year-old lad, and the remark was followed by sharp correction with a hazel switch. The old fear of, and reverence for the robin comes doubtless from the legend that the robin pricked his breast against the nails of the cross, and ministered by song and devotion to the Divine Master in His agony, and thus gained for himself and for all his posterity the affection of God, and the gratitude of man. In the old miracle plays the robin was often spoken of as "God's bird," and this also may have gained for him the love of many generations.

I passed out of the wrought-iron gates, and went into the meadows on the east side of the Abbey. The fields lay brown still, and were as bare as a billiard-table. They had been closely nipped by industrious sheep during long winter months, and now there was but little for the young life to feed on. Old, heavy, grey-faced ewes were bleating and baaing, whilst skipping, capering and leaping about were some eight or nine lambs. What jocund games theirs were, what heights they jumped, and with all four legs off the ground at once. As I looked, I wondered what were the rules of the game, and what impulse directed their sport; for there seemed to be a leader in the revels, who ran and skipped first, after which they all ran round, mounted an incline, descended and mounted it afresh, cutting a hundred capers, and playing a hundred pranks, but all according to some old unwritten law and regulation. After a few moments of watching the pretty little creatures, I made my way to the old embankment which runs across the meadows on the southern side, and which formed once the mighty dam of the artificial lake from which the prior of Wenlock drew up his fish in Lent and on special fast days. There probably during the Middle Ages the lake was well supplied with carp, eels, trout, and perch. Old Dame Juliana Berners, the prioress of Sopwell, near St. Albans, wrote much and praised warmly the pleasures of angling.

“If the sport fail,” she wrote, “at least the angler hath his holsom walke, and may enjoy at his ease the ayre and swete savoure of the medes of floures that maketh him hungry and he may hear also the melodious harmony of fowles.” She then goes on to say that he can see also, thus happily employed, “the wild broods of young swannes, heerons, duckes, cotes and all other

fowles," and declares that a silent walk by stream or lake in her eyes confers a greater and deeper happiness upon the angler "than all the noyse of hounds," than "the blasts of hornes," or "the wilde serye that hunters of fawkeners can make."

I like to think of the holy brothers fishing here in their hours of recreation, after their vigils, fasts, and prayers. As I walked along I saw the group of willows that had turned crimson and brilliant amber, and far away I heard the cawing of the rooks as they flew over the plantation of poplars, which, too, were turning red. I followed along the Abbot's Walk, as the townspeople term the dam, and then passed through a hunting gate across a wild field of scrubby bushes and rough herbage where the wild plover was uttering her melancholy cry and wheeled in circles overhead. The mole-catcher had been at work, a string of velvety moles hung like grapes upon a thorn.

Some years ago, "the ount catcher," as he is called here, old Peter Purslowe, appeared in a moleskin waistcoat. Since then, however, he has never worn another. "The missus," I was told, "found it too weedy a job ever to make a second, although it furnishes well, but it had more stitches than ever there be stones at the Abbey."

I approached the rookery; what a babel greeted my ears, yet if you have ever listened carefully you will perceive that each rook has a different note of voice, and I suspect, if you knew rooks individually, you would notice, like in the songs of canaries, that no two rooks ever caw precisely alike.

What a wonderful thing it is, the return of the rooks to any given place.

For months they had been absent from this spot,

gone nobody knows where. Not a sign of them. And then, almost to a day, they reappeared, and claimed their own tree and branch; and each pair, I fancy, went back to the site of its former nest. Curious stories are told of the sagacity of rooks, of their self-government, and of how offenders who have disobeyed some common law have been executed before large numbers, evidently as a judgment, and as a warning to others.

As I watched them, a story bearing out the truth of this statement came back to me. In the rookery of a friend there was hatched, I was told, a rook with white wings. The community did not make any objection to the youngster being reared there; but when, the following year, the white-winged bird returned to an old avenue of elms, where he had been hatched, exception was taken to his desire to nest there. It seemed, said my friend, as if a congress was called, and as if the strangely marked rook and his mate were given the option to fly elsewhere, or receive some dire punishment; for at intervals they were chased away, but kept on returning to the same spot. All day, rooks seemed, said my informant, to flock to the avenue, till the air seemed almost black with them. They flew, cawed wildly, and seemed in a highly excited state. This went on hour after hour, without any apparent change; until at last one old bird descended from the branch on which he had been perched, and standing on the grass, flapped his wings slowly, uttering a strange, low, mysterious cry, more like the husky croaking of a carrion crow than the cawing of a rook. In a moment the whole grove, said my informant, resounded with the cries of the rooks, and one and all simultaneously fell upon the unfortunate bird with the white wings, screaming and cawing, and never rested until they had pecked

him to death, and torn almost every feather out of his helpless body.

I recalled this curious story, and then watched the birds as they flew round, finding sticks for their nests. Ash sticks seemed to be their favourite material, or twigs from the great wych-elm a field away.

The rooks seemed, to quote a boyish expression, "to build fair," quite different from the mischievous jackdaws, "who will allus rather thieve than work," as an old keeper once said to me.

It is curious how rooks change their food during the different months of the year. They feed their young almost entirely on animal food till they leave the nest. As a rule, they give the young rooks, grubs, worms and cockchafers; but during the very dry summers that closed the nineteenth century, being short of insect food, the old birds took to robbing hen-coops, and fell also upon young pheasants and partridges in the grass. Several keepers have told me that they were obliged to destroy whole rookeries on this account, for when a rook once takes to chickens or pheasants, like a man-eating tiger, he will never return to humbler diet.

It is wonderful how tenacious rooks are, of returning year after year to the same place, and how difficult it is for any one to start a new colony. Nests may be put up, and young birds partially tamed, but it is a hard matter, as a gardener once said to me, "to 'tice the rooks against their will; 'tis like callin' the wild geese, unless they wish to hear."

In the South there is a strong belief that when the rooks abandon a rookery some misfortune will happen to the owner. At Chilton Candover it is said, there was much excitement because the rooks in Lady Ashburton's

park unaccountably forsook their nests. Almost immediately afterwards occurred Lady Ashburton's death, and many stories of a similar character are told.

As I leant over the fence, watching what was going on in the rookery, I heard a strange low cry in the distance, as of something unearthly and eërie,—what Bess once said sounded like the “call-note of a witch.” I remarked in the great black bird that came overhead, a different flight, slower and heavier than that of a rook, and I recognized in the bird approaching a carrion crow.

I stood motionless. The rooks were too much occupied with their building operations to notice the enemy, but the peewits, who lay earlier in the meadow beyond, were calling uneasily, uttering that strange cry of alarm which is their special note of warning. On flew the carrion crow, the bird of ill-omen in the old ballads and a messenger of death according to old belief. Anyway, if not quite so evil as he has been represented, the crow is a bird that does great damage to keepers and farmers and has few friends. As he flew away, I heard at regular intervals, his creepy wicked cry.

Old Shropshire folks still repeat to their grandchildren, when they see a carrion crow—

“Dead 'orse, dead 'orse,
Where? Where?
Prolly Moor. Prolly Moor.
We'll come, we'll come.
There's nought but bones.”

In old days, Shropshire children used to imagine that carrion crows flew off at night to Prolly Moor, there to roost. Prolly Moor is a great tract of wild land that lies at the foot of the Longmynd, and is said to be the sleeping-ground of crows and the place where witches hold midnight revels.

I kept my eyes on the bird, and saw him sail away, skirting in his flight the old town, and at last I noted that he flew over the top of the Edge, at the back of Wenlock Town.

As I retraced my steps homewards, I was greeted by the soft music of the chimes. How prettily they sounded across the meadows; "Life is a dream, life is a dream," they seemed to say; yet for all their dreamy sound I remembered that they are calling out the hour of nine, and in spite of the joy of spring, the cry of birds, and the charm of beast and flower, I hurried up the stairs to the east garden and regained the house.

On the threshold of the east entrance to the Abbey I met Bess.

"Mama," she said reprovingly, "where have you been? Your breakfast is getting cold, and it is to-day, to-day I tell you."

The last part of Bess's speech referred to the gift—the present of all the presents, as my little girl called it—which was to arrive; in other words, to the pug puppy.

"Listen, mama," she cried, "it is to come by the train this afternoon; and Mamie has sent me a ribbon, all blue," and my little girl showed me a ribbon and a letter announcing the fact in a childish round hand. "Pups," continued Bess, gravely, "cannot be dressed in anything but blue. Then there is the day-bed to discuss, his saucer and his supper plate—mamsie, there is a great deal to do," and Bess hurried me upstairs to see the preparations.

We found together a white saucer, and Bess looked forward to washing it. But Nan said severely, "Best let Liza, she understands such things." And I feared,

from the pursed-down corners of Nan's mouth, poor master pug would get but a scant welcome. Bess noticed the expression on old Nana's face and whispered, "Specs God never gave Nan a dog-brother in all her life." Nan sat on stitching as if nothing could move her from her seat, as she always does in moments of irritation, and I must agree with Bess, that she was neither kind nor helpful in her preparations for the arrival of Prince Charming, as we christened our expected visitor.

As we left the room, Nan lifted her eyes from her work, and said severely, "Might be a baby, I'm sure." We both felt rather chilled at this, and Bess took my hand, and, while she jumped down two steps at a time, asked if I didn't think my own bedroom would be better for the Prince than hers.

"One dog more, mamsie," she urged, "couldn't make much difference. Where there's place for Mouse, mams, I am sure there is place for a pup."

"But supposing Mouse objected?" I said. "What a big mouth she has, and what sharp teeth, and what a poor little thing the Prince would be in her jaws! Besides," I asserted, "I must introduce them carefully; what if our old friend should be jealous or 'unsympathetic' like another old friend?"

"Whatever Mouse may be, she can never," declared Bess, "be real cross, like a real live woman. Dogs aren't made that way." And so that part of the subject dropped.

I went down to breakfast, and Bess sat by me talking twelve by the dozen; her whole soul was engrossed as to where the Prince's day-basket was to be kept, and whether the miniature blanket was to be tucked round his infinitesimal serene highness—or not.

As I got up from my breakfast, I saw to my dismay that the post had brought me, what a friend calls, "an avenging pile of letters." How many hours' writing they meant, and other people's work! Bess standing by cried, "I wish they were all mine, I never get letters except on my birthday, and at Christmas."

"And never have to answer them," I said. "Ah, my dear, when one grows up, letters mean other things besides invitations and presents. They can mean requests, bothers, worries, other people's work—and are always sharp scissors for cutting up leisure, and preventing happy hours in the garden or with one's embroidery."

"I shouldn't have them, then," retorted Bess, stolidly.

"What would you do?"

"Burn them and see what happened."

I looked at Bess and laughed. After all, the idea may be more "*Philosophe qu'on ne pense*." But I was not strong enough to carry her suggestion into action, so I kissed Bess, told her I could not carry out her plan, and said I must write all the morning, but hoped by industry to save the afternoon for myself, and to spend it as I wished.

At last all the letters were answered—invitations, requests, permissions, "characters," money sent to charities, and a great packet was assembled in the letter-box—then when the last was finished, I called to Mouse, and we wandered out together into the garden.

I felt that I had earned the pleasure of a free time amid my birds and flowers. I walked along the kitchen garden path and paused to enjoy that most excellent and wholesome of all good smells, the odour of newly upturned earth.

To the south is a hedge of thorn some four feet high,

and facing the same direction is a high wall where apricots, peaches and pears are trained.

The pears were all in blossom in dense sheets of snow, and only tips of green were visible here and there. To save the blooms from the frost, Burbidge had put some tiffany in front of the trees, and fixed down the coarse muslin-like stuff by laths of wood. There were also cordons of pears running athwart the wall, and over these to protect them he had put fir branches. These pears are of the magnificent early dessert sorts such as Clapp's Favourite, Williams' Bon Chrétien, Souvenir de Congrès, and beside these we have the earliest variety of all, the delicious little Citron des Carmès, which often yields a dish of pears the first week in August, before, so to speak, one has begun to realize that summer is fleeting.

On entering our little kitchen garden, there is a hedge of roses on each side trained against some iron rails. On one side ramps the delightful Gloire de Dijon roses with all its many tinted blossoms of orange, creamy white, and buff shades; on the other, is a hedge of the superb old General Jacqueminot. The General is a magnificent summer blossomer, he flowers in June even in Shropshire, and his flowers are of the richest, fullest, crimson, and of delicious sweetness—not as large as many of the new hybrid perpetual sorts, but General Jacqueminot's rich red is of extreme beauty, and whatsoever the season he always blossoms, and the scent is one of the sweetest known. Then I paused to stop at my bed of Ranunculi, a flower which once was held in great favour by English gardeners, but which now seldom finds a place in English *parterres*. Nothing could be seen but a few little curly leaves like sprouting parsley, but later I hoped for and expected a glory of

colour. I grow all colours, crimson, vermillion, salmon, pink, fawn, cherry and black, and some are of the darkest shade of sumptuous orange.

These flowers are often found in old Italian Church work, and I have read they were brought to Venice by the Moors, and so introduced into Italy. I found Burbidge waiting for me as I came up to him. He said he was pleased to see me. I had not seen the old man in the garden for some weeks. He had been ill since his visit to Clun, and I had only seen him in bed, and then in the presence of his old wife Hester—an austere middle-aged woman “given to chapel ways,” as Burbidge expresses it, so I had heard nothing fresh of Benjamin or of his granddaughter Sal. After we had settled the kinds of dahlias, and how best to sow the sweet-peas, which last were to be sown in separate groups in lines, I called my old gardener aside, away from “his boys” as he calls them, although Roderick Pugh and Absalom Preece are middle-aged men, and asked him in a whisper about his visit to Clun.

“Was your brother better?” I asked. “Anyway, tell me about them all.”

“Dahlias first,” said Burbidge shortly, and touched his hat. And I felt there was not a moment to be wasted, so we looked out a plot of ground that was suitable to receive all the tubers, and then at last I got him away, and to speak about his visit to his brother.

Poor Sal——

At first my old friend would not answer my questions, and only looked grave, and shook his head. But at last he yielded to my entreaties, and after calling out to his boys to attend to their business and to do some “job” in the far distance, he followed me into a secluded path.

"I would not for ever so much as them boys should hear," he began. "It might clean scare they, and make 'em feckless about their spring digging and fettling; but as yer have asked me, I'll make a clean breast of the business. I looked in at the show, but," Burbidge declared scornfully, "it warn't nothing better than I've seen scores of times in my own apple-room; and as to the crocuses, hellebores and scillas, they wern't nothing but what us has, and better."

My old friend always enjoys speaking disparagingly of shows and exhibitions, whatever he really thinks, for even gardeners are not without some particle of envy, I shrewdly suspect.

"Well," continued Burbidge, "after business," and I knew business meant something connected with the garden, "I went on to Clun, and there was a deal of getting to get to Clun—stopping, waiting, and mis-informing, but at last the job got done. When yer wants, yer gets, as Humphrey Kynaston said when he made the leap."

"Yes, Burbidge, but how about your brother?" I said, trying to make him keep to his point.

"I found him and Sal," answered Burbidge, "strange as bats in sunlight. They were both overlooked, sure enough. Dazed and dimmy, same as if they had been bashed and bummelled for a whole live-long week."

"What did you do?" I inquired.

"I just spoke," was his reply. "But I couldn't get no answer. One and t'other, they looked like cats as had been fair nicked by a blacksmith's dog, and they youped and trembled whensoever I spoke—and wouldn't answer, more than bats in a rick-yard. As to Sal, I couldn't get nothing out of she, save that a white dove had flown again her bedroom winder, and had called out,

‘Come, spirit, come;’ and as to brother Benjamin, he nodded and spoke Dutch, he war that mazed and foolish, and while he war taking on like, who should step inside but his son Frank. And Frank he come in bold as a lion, and trim as a dandy with a bobbish tie, and he said, ‘Here be Malachi, him as was born under this roof when my missus war took worse all of a sudden. He be a tall young fellow, hale, hearty, and fresh as a May sprig. He have joined the volunteers, and has at home his uniform, which be next best to a general’s.’ And when brother Ben heard him, he fair burst out in a rage. ‘What matters it,’ he saith, ‘what generals, or kings, or thy sons clothe themselves in, or who has beef or beer when *I* sits in mortal fear;’ and he shivered and quailed same as a poor body in a Poorhouse as hasn’t nought of his own, not so much as his own pipe or the shirt to his back. And while father and son were talking, Malachi he comed up, and he said, smiling like an April day, ‘Never you fear, grandad, for all I’m young, I know of a charm as ’ull free you from all her hanky-panky ways.’ And then, without a word from his grandad, he kind of touched his stick as if he war touchin’ a pretty wench as he war keeping company with, and he started whistlin’ an old tune, and he called out over his shoulder, ‘I’ll cure ye,’ and laughed as one who has a joke all to hisself, and so out went Malachi.

“Then there was quiet for a bit, and I heard naught but a crying of the wind outside; but suddenly voices got introduced, and we heard a crying and a calling and a scuffling in the garden, or thereabouts, loud as the cry of the Seven Whistlers; and I sat quiet till I could stand no more, then I peered out, and there, sure enough, war Malachi and the witch.

“And Malachi, he called out, ‘Down on yer knees,

yer old hathan, or I'll beat yer—old witch as yer call yerself—black and blue if yer don't stir yer old tongue and say arter me, "I hain't got no magic, nor no charms neither, I be a born fool, and I swear I'll leave Benjamin Burbidge and his granddaughter for ever more alone." "

"And the witch," continued old Thomas, "her did swear it. 'So help me God, I will,' her cried out; and her spoke as true as Gospel truth, for I think her meant it, for as Malachi said, 'tis wonderful, even with a witch, the magic of a stout ash-plant."

Burbidge's words still rung in my ears when running up the garden path I saw my little maiden approaching me.

"We shall be late," she cried excitedly, "if you don't come at once—at once, I say. And think what a terrible thing it would be to keep Prince Charming waiting."

I nodded to Burbidge and started off with Bess at a brisk trot up the front drive, mounted the field that led to the station, and waited panting on the platform for the little dog.

To my surprise Bess had a cloak on her arm.

"You are not cold, child?" I asked.

"No, no, mum; but what if the pug was to catch cold?"

"We must hope not, for that would be a calamity," I answered.

Bess skipped and danced up and down, clinging to my hand, jumping and swaying backwards and forwards, as if her little body were made of quicksilver. Then, after a while, she suddenly fell into a reflective mood, and asked what are the best ways of forgetting that you are waiting?

"To think of something else, or not to want so badly," I answered.

"I couldn't do that," answered Bess, gravely, "because I shouldn't be me if I did, and he couldn't be Prince Charming if I didn't want him. I feel," she gasped, "as if I just want, want till I am dying of wanting."

I looked at my little girl. "Suppose he didn't come by this train, what would you do then?"

"I don't know. Go to bed, I think, and cry."

But happily there was no need of so sad an ending to a bright spring day, for as I spoke the train rushed in. The porter hurried forward, and there was a general commotion. Two passengers got out, a couple of old fowls were removed, and a second later, a little basket also was taken out of the luggage-van.

"Shall I have this sent to the Abbey?" inquired the station-master.

But Bess would not hear of so slow a manner of getting the pug-puppy down. In delirious joy the little mantle was flung on the ground and her arms were tightly clasped round the basket. When one has been sent a pug-pup there is only one place to go to—home.

So I picked up the mantle, and Bess, bearing her cherished possession, led the way.

Then there was tea, which, as we have no bells, Bess saw to herself.

I heard her in the passage giving a hundred contradictory orders. It is to come at once, and then, there's to be broth for the puppy and cakes, "sponge and the other, and meat," and at last she returned breathless to me.

"I have ordered everything," she cried, and took the little dog off my knee. It was a sweet little baby dog with a crinkly-crankly black phiz and dear little blinking,

cloudy blue eyes. The ribbon that was sent to adorn his neck was much too big to fasten round his throat, but he looked contented and rested drowsily under Bess's continued protestations of affection.

After tea we sat on before the chapel hall fire.

"I thought last Christmas," said Bess, "when I had the white bride doll, that I never should want nothing no more. But now that I have the pug Prince, I know I shall never want anything again, not if I live to be a hundred."

"Wait till the next time," I laughed. At that moment I heard a scratching at the study door, which opens upon the chapel hall. I opened it and took Mouse gently by the collar.

"Bess," I said, while I held on tightly, "the introduction must be made, but with tact," and I and Mouse returned together.

I put the puppy on the rug. Mouse looked at it sadly and then walked severely away.

"Why does she behave like that?" asked Bess. "See, Mouse is whining and wants to go out."

"She is jealous," I said.

"Why should she mind?"

"Think, Bess," I replied, "what would you say if there came here a new baby, a new helpless little thing. Might it not be just a little bit of a trial to you, don't you think, when you saw all the world running about to welcome it, cake, tea, milk, cream, all ordered for it at once? We none of us like being put in the shade, not even Mouse."

Bess looked at me, and then putting the pug down, she cast her arms effusively round the great hound's neck.

"You must forgive my little pup," she said coaxingly,



"MOUSE" AT HOME.



"MOUSE" ON A VISIT.

Photos by Miss Gaskell.

"and not hate presents, even if they are for other people," and a shower of kisses followed.

Mouse was mollified; she looked at me gravely. He has not the first place, she seemed to say, and she came and laid her great head solemnly on my knees.

"She knows," said Bess, "that not even Prince Charming can put her nose out of joint."

Mouse watched the little pug out of the corner of her eye, but with more sadness than malice. Bess fed her with slices of cake, whilst the pug approached her future gigantic companion.

"All friends now," Bess whispered. "Nobody now to get nice but Nana; but nurses always take longer to forgive than dogs."

In the evening I stole upstairs and found Prince Charming sleeping in his little basket by Bess's bed. Apparently old Nana had yielded to his charms, or else was reconciled to his having a nursery existence.

She got up from her sewing and said with a smile on her good old face, "Bless her little heart, how it do please her, the pup; but then she must have what she has a mind to."

After this, I had a quiet hour with my books, and I took down for the last half-hour a volume of Montaigne. What delightful company he is, always bright and cheery, full of knowledge, and yet always so human. I came to the passage which Madame de Sévigné always said brought tears to her eyes. I refer to the "affection of the Mareschal de Montluc for his son who died in the island of Madeira."

"My poor boy," wrote the Mareschal, "never saw me with other than a stern and disdainful countenance, and now he is gone in the belief that I neither knew how to love him, nor esteemed him according to his

deserts," and the remorse and pity of it all. In the silence of the night it all came home to me. What a touching picture it is, the reserved old man with no word of love on his tongue, and yet his heart full of affection. "For whom," cries the grief-stricken old man, "did I reserve the discovery of that singular affection that I had for him in my soul?" What a pathetic tale it is, one of Montaigne's many. What a homely tongue the great essayist has, and yet what a wise one—possessing, as he does, the art of telling us all the old tales of Greece and Rome clothed in summer verdure, so that the leaves of his discourse never grow stale or faded. He makes the ancient world live again, and gives men and women who lived and died hundreds of years before he was born new life and beauty.

"Oh, do not let us love in vain. Let us find out our love before the wave has gone over the dear one's head," is what I seemed to hear. "Do not let our lips call in the coming time, 'Lord, too late, too late!'"

I thought of little Bess, the happy owner of her dog, and I said, at least, Lord, my little maid will look back on her childhood, I hope, as a happy, happy time, a time of flowers, and joyous play. Bad times must come, but let me be a happy parent in that I have given my child no more unhappy time than I could help!

The next morning I sauntered off into the garden. There were the gladioli to plant, so that they might blossom well before the autumn frosts.

First of all, come the beautiful early summer sorts such as the delicate Bride, Leonora, Mathilde, and Colvilli, and then in autumn the brilliant Brenchleyensis, Gandavensis, and exquisite soft tinted Lemoinei. Burbidge has a pocket-book in which the date of all plantings as well as sowings are registered. "Them gladiolouses,"

as he calls them, "war put in the 4th of March last year, so they this year must be put in their places without delay in the red-walled garden to enliven the borders, and there must be a large patch in the kitchen garden for pulling" (picking), for Burbidge, in common with most gardeners, cannot bear picking his blossoms in the real flower garden. Blows for the garden is the old man's constant adage, and he will sometimes say sourly, "What for do ladies want their places littered about with jars and tubs and what not, same as if their chambers was fresh-blown meads? Let 'em be, say I, where the hand of the Lord hath put 'em." And he will add, "growing blows is right, 'cause it is in the way of nature, but I don't hold to parlour bowers. They be unwholesome, not to say a bit retchy." I am inclined to agree with my old friend in some of his strictures about the modern drawing-room, for a room laden with scents, and that has closed windows, is certainly a productive source of headaches.

As I stood by the garden watching Burbidge and his men plant the gladioli, a little figure dashed up to me. "Mama," cried Bess, in a state of wild excitement, "they've come, two real princes, I really do believe."

I was puzzled for a moment, but at last I stammered out, "Where? Where?"

"At the pond, at the pond," exclaimed Bess, trembling with delight.

I could not get anything more out of Bess, but Burbidge, hearing her mention the pond, hobbled up.

"Bless her little heart!" he said, "the little lady means the swans."

And in answer to my inquiry, "What swans?" he answered—

“Didn’t yer hear, mam, about the great birds? No?” Then he went on to tell me how, in the early morning, when he and the under-gardeners “war fettling up on the east side between six and seven, us suddenly heard a kind of unearthly crying, like some one moaning and sobbing, and whispering right up aloft. And then,” continued my old friend, “I seed such a sight as I’ve never seen afore. Fowls as big as chest o’ drawers flyin’ round and round. They came on flying in great circles, as if they couldn’t stop, till down they flumped like a couple of cannon balls, and struck slap into the great Abbey pool.

“I did,” pursued Burbidge, “tell Miss Celestine later to let yer know, seeing as you be interested in all fur and fluff, birds and insects, and most varmint, but her have no sense, save for frills and furbelows.”

On hearing of the arrival of the swans, I seized hold of Bess’s hand, and off we went together to welcome our new visitors.

They were beautiful white birds of spotless plumage, probably driven from the lake of Willey, or from further off, by the cruelty of their parents. For old swans become terribly fierce as the nesting season comes on, and will not even allow the offspring of a past spring to remain on their own waters.

“How lovely they are,” said Bess, enthusiastically. “It is a real fairy-story, mamsie, this time.”

Then we returned to the Abbey, and brought out a basket of broken scraps. Bess threw some pieces into the water, and the swans stooped down their beautiful graceful necks and fed with avidity. Bess watched them intently, whilst Mouse, who had followed us too, looked on superciliously; and then, with great greediness, ate all the bread that she could reach, so that, as

Bess said, "too much food should not be wasted on mere swans."

"Isn't she greedy?" cried Bess. "At home she hardly eats even cake!"

Poor old Mouse! She is made up of unamiable vices, excepting to us. Then Nana appeared, and declared crossly that my little girl would catch her death of cold standing on the damp grass by the water.

Bess fired up at this and retorted, "As if, Nana, people ever catch cold when they watch swans. Why, my mother watches birds hundreds of hours, and she never catches cold."

But, in spite of Bess's protestations, my little maid was carried off by Nan, who, I heard, afterwards went off to the post-office to get a postal order.

When Bess returned from her short turn, I noticed that she was grave and silent, and not at all the usual bouncing Bess of Wenlock, as we are won't to call her. I mentioned that I was going for a longer walk, in search of white violets, and begged her to come with me, if she was not too tired, and bring a basket in case we found any.

At first I thought Bess's reluctance sprang from the fact that Prince Charming would have to be left at the Abbey, although I assured her that Auguste would fully console the Prince for our absence; but say what I would, Bess seemed out of spirits. And so, before we started, I sat down on a bench and asked my little girl, who looked worried, if she was not feeling well.

"Yes," answered Bess, "only, only——" And then I found out the truth. "When Nan and I were walking in the town," Bess explained, "Mr. James, Hals' father's coachman, came into the chemist's shop and told us that Fräulein was dreadful bad, tumbled down and

broke her leg, he said. He laughed and said it was a judgment for being *that nasty* to Master Harry. But oh, mama, could it—could it really be?”

“No, Bess,” I answered quickly, “don’t think that for a moment. You were very naughty, and very silly, but then you are only a little child, and you did not know what you said, or understood what you meant. Beside,” I said rather grandly, to get over the difficulty, “God has other work than to attend to the idle words of a little child. So dry your eyes, dear, and be a happy little person again. Run upstairs and fetch a basket, and we will go off together.”

But Bess shook her head. “I will be a happy little girl,” she said, “but I’d rather not go all the same,” and she left me.

So I started off alone with Mouse, who, nothing loth, followed me gladly on my expedition.

We all have favourite flowers, or imagine that we have, probably owing to some early association or to some tender recollection. Queen Bess is said to have best loved meadow-sweet, with which her chambers were strewn. The great Condé, they say, was devoted to pinks; and Marie Antoinette is said to have loved sweet rocket, bunches of which were brought her by Madame Richard to the Temple.

I called to mind these favourite blossoms, but my floral love is not of the garden, it has no place in tended borders. I love it even better than the choicest rose, or the most brilliant gladiolus, or the most stately lily. It grows amongst the hedgerows of Shropshire, and is known as the wild white violet.

Its scent is sweet but often elusive, and as evanescent as a beautiful smile. Our highly cultivated borders and *parterres* are beautiful, but our wild carpets in field

and wood more beautiful. Wild flowers come amidst the grass, and blossom at their own sweet will in their own sweet place, and the moor, meadow, or coppice make the most enchanting background for their loveliness.

I wandered along the green paths with hedgerows starting into life, and came to the conclusion that the flowers we each love best are the homely flowers of childhood that we played by, and plucked as children. The dog-rose, the violet, or the primrose, whose leaves we know the inside and the outside of, whose stalks we have handled a hundred times, and whose scents recall dear faces, and gentle memories, that go back to long ago.

I walked along, Mouse following dutifully behind me. The hedgerows were full of green curls and twists, groups of wild arums glittered on the banks below hazel and quickset hedges. Here and there little patches of grass had burst into emerald green, and a few daisies were turning their discs to heaven, whilst in sheltered spots dim primroses were dawning shyly on the world, filling the atmosphere with sweet dalliance and dreaminess. Once, as I wandered along, I saw behind a cottage in a lane a mauve carpet of periwinkles, and once, beneath a chestnut, I saw the glitter of golden king-cups, that Wordsworth loved so well. The afternoon was very fair, purple and golden lights flitted round the hills and rested on the freshly ploughed hillsides; "longer days and sunshine," the thrushes seemed to sing, and I heard them piping exultantly in every orchard as I passed. I went by the Red Marsh Farm, past the old mullion-windowed barn, which is said to have been a chapel in monkish days, and so across the close-nipped fields to Sherlot Forest. I walked by a

patch of gorse all ablaze with golden blossoms. Tiny young rabbits dashed under cover, showing their white scuts. My great hound lumbered after them like a luggage train in mad career; but nothing happened—they vanished like lightning, and Mouse joined me panting at the hunting gate below. As I whistled her into heel, I noticed that the honeysuckles in the hedgerow were clothing themselves in silvery green, and that a willow by a pool was bursting into golden glory. The earth was dry and I could not resist sitting down for a moment. A squirrel dashed up an oak and scolded and chattered, Mouse, seeing him, growled angrily; a greenfinch flew from out of a thicket, giving me a beautiful vision of apple-green wings; whilst in the distance I heard, far off, the note of a distant blackbird singing a song of regret and tender longing. How enchantingly lovely all was, and on all sides no sounds but country ones.

I peeped over the hedge, men were ploughing and sowing the grain, and away to the west I heard a boy whistling a few notes of a half-forgotten tune. What was the tune, I wondered.

How few folks whistle or sing now; the time was when everybody “sang a bit,” as Burbidge calls it, to their work—men in the hayfields, women at the wash-tub. Was the world, when it sang at its work, a happier or jollier world? I asked myself.

I passed over a stile and walked across a clover field. How prosperous it looked, how green after the seared and sad appearance of permanent pasture, which still lay brown and lifeless. Overhead the bravest of all West-country songsters was singing—the skylark. What a speck he appeared throbbing in the sky, only a little dot hardly bigger than a pin’s head; but what a voice he

had, what a cry of exultant joy was his, what a melody of passion, what a glory of triumphant music! I stood and listened like the poet, and wondered how a bird could sing so; such joy, such passionate melody seemed superhuman, and how the notes were produced in the tiny throat was then and will always remain a mystery. He did not seem a living, breathing bird; only a voice—a voice of incarnate joy and gladness. Silver hammers seemed to throb within him and to beat out a prayer of ecstatic joy, which no heart could measure, and no human tongue pronounce. Then suddenly, as a leaf, he fell, and the exquisite singer of a moment before became again only the little brown bird, a dweller amongst green fields, and a familiar of everyday life. Yet for all that we, too, dwell on earth and toil and spin, it is well to have heard the music of heaven. I walked along refreshed and gladdened, for in spite of the shadows that envelope us, "there burns in each an invisible sun," and amid such scenes it is impossible not to feel a passing ray.

At last I reached the well-known bank. A few shy violets were in blossom—the afternoon sun was playing upon the opening blossoms. I picked two or three tiny flowers, but only a few, for I like to leave a spot as fair as I found it, and the little petals were still tightly curled. Growing close to the violet was another charming woodland flower, the wood-sorrel, or witches' cheeses as village children often call it here. The little blossoms were of an exquisite translucent white, with delicate lavender veins, and strange triangular leaves that folded up at night like the leaves of a sensitive plant.

Some people say that the wood-sorrel is the true shamrock used by St. Patrick to illustrate the doctrine of the Trinity. Be this as it may, it is a delightful

little plant, and one of the most charming inhabitants of our English woods.

Its veined delicate petals recalled to me the form and beauty of the exquisite grass of Parnassus, which I have often discovered on the moors of the west coast of Scotland and in a few spots in the wildest parts of the Shropshire hills. A little further on, I came to a patch under a hazel tree of bronze leaves. These I recognized to be the leaves of the ground ivy, and its minute mauve blossoms were just coming into blossom. This plant used to be called ales-hoof, and was formerly put into beer as a flavouring, much in the same manner as we put borage now into claret cup, or introduce into badminton a peach, or a spray of nettles. From the ground ivy an excellent tea can be made which possesses purifying qualities for the blood, and which was formerly much used in Shropshire as a spring tonic. Tea from a decoction of nettles is also constantly drunk in Shropshire, as is also a drink made from wild mallows.

As I retraced my steps the light was fast fading, and the gold turning into lavender. All was dying, the reds and golds turning into sombre browns and greys. Flowers were falling asleep, and far away I saw a line of cattle gently driven to some far farm-steading. As I walked across the meadows, I noted that the little lambs had crept to their dams' sides, and meant to remain there quiet and snug till the small hours of the morning. Alone in the dusk I caught here and there the triumphant song of the throstle; all else was still. In the gloaming I saw dimly brown figures crossing upland and valley to the lonely hamlets that nestled amongst a starry mist of damson groves. The bright March day of work and gaiety was over. Frost might visit the earth in the night, but to-morrow, judging by the red

sunset, would be another day of gladness and hope and brightness. I told myself spring had come, and that soon all our dear feathered friends would return. The nightingales would sing in the south, in every hazel coppice, and in the dusky groves of twilight, whilst all over England swallows would fly, near smoky towns and over lonely meres and rivers alike, carrying the message that sovereign summer was at hand.

When I returned to the Abbey, I found that Bess was in bed.

"She be asleep," nurse said, "but she seemed wonderful busy about something, all in a flurry like, and didn't take no notice, not even of the pug; but her would say her prayers twice over. And when I asked why for? She answered it war best so, for the Lord somehow would make her happy, even if she had to pray twice over for a blessing."

Then old Nana went on to say, "This afternoon, Miss Bess went out with Liza after you left, and as they comed in they was whispering together. I don't hold with slyness," and old Nana pursed up her mouth, and I felt, as the French say, that Liza would have at some future time a bad quarter of an hour, and that a storm was brewing in the domestic cup. I didn't, however, ask for an explanation, but waited for the morrow to reveal the acts of to-day.

I walked downstairs and sat down before my writing-table, and wrote a long letter to a sister. What a comfortable relationship is that of a sister, a very armchair of affection, for with a sister no explanations are necessary. Then there is nothing too small to tell a sister. Worries, pleasures, little heartaches, all may find their way on paper, and not appear foolish or ill-placed. So I wrote away gaily, a little about flowers, books, garden,

embroidery, cuisine, a little domestic worry, and I wound up with a quotation.

As I was folding up my letter, I suddenly heard a knock at the door. "Come in," I cried, and I saw Liza at the door, candle in hand.

"Miss Bess is all right?"

"Oh yes, mam; but I thought I should like you to know——"

Then Liza went on to say that nurse had taken on terribly, and was all of a stew because she had let Miss Bess spend her money as she had wished this afternoon.

"Miss Bess," continued Eliza, "would have it so, and wouldn't take no refusal; and, as Mrs. Milner was out at tea with Mrs. Burbidge, I had to let the child do as she had a mind to."

"Well, what happened?"

"Oh, I hardly know," replied Eliza. "We went to ——" mentioning a shop—"but there Miss Bess wouldn't on no account that I or Mlle. Célestine should come in. She called out, 'Stay outside till I have done.' So Mademoiselle and I we walked outside up and down till we was fit to drop, and then, I do assure you, mam," added Eliza, "I knew nothing till I saw Miss Bess come out with a small parcel, which she held very tight and wouldn't give up to nobody, and then I seed as it was directed in Mr. Burbidge's handwriting—that is to say, there was a label; and we sent off the package, and I paid twopence in stamps for doing so, but Miss Bess wouldn't tell me, ask her as much as I would, who it was for. Mademoiselle tried hard to make Miss Bess tell, but she couldn't get nothing out of her, although she caught hold of her; but Mr. James, the butcher's boy, coming up, Mademoiselle let Miss Bess be, and

so we went home; and I didn't think much about it till I looked into Miss Bess's purse to-night to see what she had spent, and then I saw there wasn't one penny left, and she must, I fear, have spent it all on the packet. It's only right, mam, as you should know," pursued Liza, flushing crimson, "lest Mrs. Milner should say that I had taken some, for just now Mrs. Milner be quite furious, fussing round and saying that Miss Bess has been fair robbed."

"Never mind," I said, "when I see Miss Bess in the morning I will go into the matter, and find out how she spent her money."

I wondered, as I sat down and began to embroider after folding up my letter, what would be the explanation of the mystery. Probably, I said to myself, a little present to Harry, for Bess is a very generous little soul, and most of her pocket-money is spent in gifts.

The next morning my old nurse, holding tightly Bess's hand, came downstairs just as I had finished breakfast. She looked, as Burbidge would say, "black as tempest," and I didn't envy Eliza's place in the nursery.

"Miss Bess will tell you," she said, "and as for Liza, I think it a most disgraceful affair to have let the poor lamb spend her money as she and Mademoiselle did, and never so much as to turn their heads back. Pack of fools talkin' to passers-by whilst the poor child was bein' robbed. That's what I call 'em."

"I wasn't," cried Bess, stoutly. "It was my own money and my own fault. I paid it all myself, and I won't tell nobody about it but mama."

Old Nana took no notice of this outburst, and vowed that she would get the money back somehow, and let everybody know what she really thought of 'em. I said nothing, for the fat was in the fire, and the one thing

that I am sure of was, that you couldn't change anybody's determination of over seventy; and what Nana determines to do, Nana will do, for all the king's horses and all the king's men. When Bess and I were alone, I turned to Bess. "Tell me, little girl," I said.

Bess answered, "Oh, mama, I know it is all right. Nana's very old, but she couldn't get it out of me. I mean to tell nobody but you and Hals, for a secret is a secret." And she added irrelevantly, "I couldn't walk with you because I felt I must do it."

"What, dear?"

"*Making it up with God*," replied Bess, but quite reverently. "When I heard that Fräulein had broken her leg, I knew that something must be done, for, for all you said, mamsie, I couldn't help feeling that my curse might have done something; not," explained Bess, "exactly made Fräulein break her leg, but it might have made it easier for her to do so."

"Yes, dear, but tell me what you did."

"Oh, you know, mamsie," answered Bess. "I went off for a walk with Liza and Celestine, but first of all I slipped upstairs when nobody was looking and got my purse. I didn't quite know what I had, for I didn't stop to count the money inside, but there were three silver bits and four copper monies."

"When I got into Mr. ——'s shop," pursued Bess, "I said I wanted something that would be a comfort to somebody who had broken their leg. And he said, 'Certainly, Miss, I have just what you want.' And he gave me a little leather case painted all over with pink and blue flowers, quite pretty, though not quite like any flowers that I know."

"Yes, Bess," I said, and took little Bess's hand encouragingly.

"Well," said Bess, "I don't rightly understand monies, so I told Mr. — to take out what he wanted. But he said there wasn't quite enough; so I said I would bring the rest next Saturday, when I got paid up for my good-conduct marks, if it wasn't very much. And he said, 'Don't mention it, miss, only sixpence more.'

"So, then," pursued Bess, "he did up the little packet, and if a shopman does not know what is good for a person with a broken leg, who should, I should like to know," and Bess looked round her triumphantly.

Then my little maid went on to say, "I stuck on the label that Burbidge wrote for me, and that he did for me in the tool-house when we two were alone; but he put Miss, not Fräulein, as we neither of us knew how to spell it. But we wrote governess below, and Roderick, who, Burbidge says, is a scholar, put in '*her* with the broken leg,' so they were sure to understand. And then Mr. — stuck it with his tongue—for it was all gummy—and I and he pressed it down tight, and then Liza and I carried it off to the post-office, and that is all."

Then Bess added, with a catch in her throat, "I haven't been wicked this time. Nana says it's wicked to spend my money without telling you; but I say I must *pay off* God, for I want to be happy as princes and princesses are happy in fairy-stories."

Bess's attitude of mind was a little difficult to follow, as is often the case with children; but as I felt that the whole funny little business had sprung more from childish kindness than anything else, all I did was to kiss my little maid and say, "Fräulein will be pleased."

Bess left me beaming. "My mama," I heard her say later to her old nurse, "says there is no harm in

what I did ; and that I may give cigarette-cases or whatever I like to governesses who break their legs."

Two days later Miss Weldon received a letter from Fräulein Schlieman, returning the case, and saying with some asperity—

"I do not smoke, whatever they believe of German women in England."

Bess, on receiving back her gift, was filled with indignation.

"Why cannot governesses smoke?" she asked. "If I was a governess I should smoke to oblige." And then, in a fit of virtuous fury, she handed over the case to Burbidge, with the lofty command of "Smoke at once." Later on, my little daughter told me, "I couldn't help it if Fräulein didn't smoke." And then added, "Anyway, God knows I spent my money on her, and Burbidge says that's sure to count."

CHAPTER IV

APRIL

"Strowe me the ground with daffodoundilles
And cowslips and king-cups, and loved lillies,
The pretie pawnee,
And the cheveraunce
Shall match with the fayre flowre Delice."

SPENSER, *Shepherd's Calendar*.

A soft sweet day. A gentle rain had fallen all through the night, and the sense of spring was everywhere. Soft mellow sunshine flooded into the house. How the chestnut buds glistened in the sunlight, all damp, and sticky, and a few even had begun to uncurl.

The almonds were out in sheets of rosy pink blossom. Bees were humming everywhere, and thrushes were piping their jubilant strains on every gnarled apple tree.

I asked at breakfast for my little maid, but I was told that she was not yet down, and even our irreproachable butler Fremantle seemed almost inclined to laugh, if such a sedate and irreproachable person can descend to such levity, as he told me that Miss Bess, he feared, would be a little late that morning.

I had, as it happened, many letters to answer, and so forgot to trouble about Bess, for I had heard her chirp like a bird between six and seven in the morning, and therefore was not anxious. I remembered now that Bess had been often up to tea at the Red House of late, and

that when Constance and she had met, they had whispered much, and that Bess had often caught her hand and held it tightly before parting, and then bubbled over with happy laughter. Once, when I asked Bess the cause of all this mystery, she replied, "Only white secrets, mum," and Constance had laughed too, and repeated the child's words, "Only white secrets."

Whilst I stuck down my letters, I recalled these little half-forgotten episodes, when suddenly the door was flung open with a bang, and Bess stood before me; but not my every-day little Bess in short petticoats, and white pinafore, and her locks hanging round her, with a mane like a Church Stretton pony's, but my little Bess clothed in a fancy-ball costume, in that of a diminutive jester of the fourteenth century, with cap and bells, in little yellow and pink tights with satin embroidered vest, and her luxuriant locks confined in a cap.

She entered shaking her bells merrily, and as I started up in surprise, she exclaimed, "Don't say anything, mamsie, please don't. Wait till you have heard my verse, or you will spoil everything. Constance has learnt it me, and I have said it over and over again. You see it is All Fools' Day, and I must give you a surprise, for Nana says, a surprise is next best to a birthday."

And then my little girl faced me, in the middle of the old chamber, with the great stone altar as a background, and piped aloud in her gay childish way. The old rhyme somewhat altered—

"When April her Folly's throne exalts,
While Dob calls Nell, and laughs because she halts,
While Nell meets Tom, and says he too must play,
Then laughs in turn, and laughing runs away,
Let us my muse thro' Folly's harvest range
And glean some moral into Wisdom's grange."



Photo by Miss K. Wintour.

THE CHAPEL HALL.



It is an old rhyme, and I am told that Constance had taught it to my little maid. I stood looking at my dear little fool, all blushes and sweet smiles. "Constance," continued Bess, "was sure it would make you laugh." And then, after a pause, she added, "I have not done yet. Listen; I know all the funny things, pit-pat. Miss Weldon may not find me clever, but Constance says I learnt at once what she taught me. You see, mum, it is all fun, and fun with Constance is better than boxes of sugar-plums;" and here my little lass began to cut a hundred capers, to jingle her bells, and to dance gaily, calling out, "There are heaps of funny things to do. I must send Burbidge on a sleeveless errand, tell Absalom to go for the map of the Undiscovered Islands, and send Célestine for pigeons' milk, and won't she be cross! Crabs won't be in it, no, not if they were steeped in vinegar for a month, Nana says." And away danced my little lass into the brilliant April sunshine.

I did not catch what she said to the old gardener outside, but I heard a deep roar of laughter from Burbidge, and a bass duet of guffaws, from Absalom and Roderick; and a minute later Burbidge entered from the garden and told me, his face beaming with honest pleasure, that "Miss Bess was the gayest little Folly that had ever come to Wenlock, and would surely make folks laugh like an ecall come what might."

A few minutes later, and Bess flew off to her old nurse and to Auguste, and both I heard, by their shrill exclamations, affected to be overcome with laughter at her approach. Inside and outside, on this first of April, I heard sounds of merriment, as if a return to old customs had come back, and as if loud and jocund mirth had not died out of simple hearts. I thought of all the old games,

plays, quips, and pranks, that the old walls of the Abbey Farmery must have heard and seen in the Middle Ages, for even the monks allowed times of folly and revelry, at Yule-tide and Candlemas, I have read; and on the first of April, All Fools' Day, many must have been the hearty laugh, and simple joke, that folks made and passed on each other in Wenlock town, and all over old England.

I popped my letters into the box for post, and stepped out, as my task for the day was accomplished. The morning was enchantingly beautiful. "Old Adam" glistened beneath the sundial like a wondrous jewel, the eyes in his tail seemed of a hundred tints. He appeared, as Buffon said, "to combine all that delights the eye in the soft, and delicate tints of the finest flowers, all that dazzles it in the sparkling lustre of gems, and all that astonishes it, in the grand display of the rainbow." His tail appeared of a hundred tints, and the red gold of the featherlets round the eyes flashed as if illuminated by fire. His grey, subdued wives, walked meekly beside him, and cast upon him humble glances of admiration, while he strutted before them with the pride of a Scotch piper, and expanded his tail with a strange mechanical whirr, that recalled the winding-up of some rich, elaborate, modern toy.

Down by the Abbey pond I saw the two swans swimming, but, every now and then, the male bird seemed almost to leap out of the water in the delight of spring, and beat the water with his great snowy wings as he drove across the glass-like expanse at a furious rate, making the little wavelets rise and fall and dance, in a crystal shimmer over reeds and grass.

Suddenly a little moor-hen dipped and bobbed out of the reeds. With an angry cry, one of the swans went

for her, and I thought, for a moment, the poor little bird must have fallen a victim to his murderous beak; but the little black bird, as Burbidge would have said, "was nimble as ninepence," and doubled, and dived, before her enemy could reach her. It was very good to be out. Life seemed enough. The island in the centre of the Abbot's pond had become a sheet of primroses, and looked as if it had been sown with stars; and as I stood in the garden, the scent of the crimson ribes reached me. What a rich perfume it was! and what a distance it carried. In the full sunshine it was almost like incense, swung before the high altar of some old-world cathedral. I wandered away into the red-walled garden. How busy Burbidge was! The fir branches and matting were to be taken down off the tea-roses, and away from the beautiful purple and lavender clematises, my autumn splendours.

Beautiful Mrs. George Jackman, that shone like a great full moon in the dusk on clear summer nights, was now to be allowed "to open out," as gardeners say, and the sun and soft winds were once more to play with her tender leaves, and delicate tendrils.

Then the exquisite tea hybrid roses, such as Augustine Guinoiseau la France, and that richest of all the noisettes, William Allen Richardson, were to dispense with their protecting fir branches. The time had come for them to feel the joy of full sunlight again, and the tree peonies were no longer to be enveloped in tawny fern branches, or to lie smothered in litter.

As I stood in the pathway, I heard Burbidge walking up and down the paths, giving orders in the Shropshire tongue that I love so well.

A mantle of spring splendour had fallen upon all. Lines of yellow crocuses shone like threads of gold.

Crown Imperials were opening their rich brown, metallic-looking blossoms. Pink and white daphne bushes perfumed the air, and I noted that a host of hungry bees were humming greedily round them. Chionodoxas of all shades, were looking enchantingly fair. The blue Sardensis was opening its petals, of the same wonderful sapphire-blue shade as the Alpine gentian. Then in blossom also I noted Chionodoxa Luciliae, that had the delicacy and daintiness of a piece of china, and lovely Alleni, that recalled the beauty of a sunset sky when the gold is dying, and when celestial amber is dissolving and melting into exquisite tones of mauve and lavender.

A little later, I found Burbidge hard at work pruning my great bed of hybrid teas, and hybrid perpetual roses, that I have planted with alternate rows of old Dutch and Darwin tulips, with English and Spanish irises, and with lines of grape and Botryoides hyacinths. "Us must get a bit of the bush off," said my old gardener, as he plied his pruning scissors. I begged him, however, not to cut my hybrid teas too hard, as now so many gardeners are inclined to do, for roses in Shropshire, it seemed to me, did not like too much of the knife, or of the French drastic treatment. "Let it be a rose *bush* in England," I pleaded.

"Right you are, ma'am," replied Burbidge, "for there's many as uses the knife as a child the whip. Most of the roses here be on their own roots, and so, healthy and abiding. Manetti stuff have blooms big as saucers the first year, but go out the next year like candles as the wind's overmastered. They be like most fandangles—no stay in them."

So saying, my old friend plied his scissors vigorously, and the click, click, resounded all through the garden. Before I left the red-walled garden, I had a word with

my old gardener about my hedge of Austrian briars. What a wonderful single rose it is, and the variety is very ancient. Parkinson mentions it in his "Theatre of Plants," and calls it "the vermilion rose of Austria." If we prune it this year, we shall get no flowers, I lamented, and I am always very loth to let the pruning shears work their will with my pet rose. Then I turned to my moss roses: pink, white, purple, and the most beautiful variety of all, the old crested. They were all big bushes and must be kept in shape, but should not be pruned in the ordinary sense.

Besides these sorts already named, I grow in my garden the beautiful roses of Japan—the purple and white, and the semi-duplex kinds, all of which bear such superb hips in the autumn. I told Burbidge that we must net some of the bushes in autumn, and that I would try later and get some German recipes for making them into preserves. In Elizabethan days, I have read, "Cooks and their ladies did know how to prepare from hips many fine dishes for their tables." Burbidge scoffed at this notion. "Let the wild things be, marm," he said to me; and added, "I never heard of much that was good wild, but nuts." At this I laughed and replied, "Wait and see—and taste."

Burbidge told me, that he proposed to carry out the bees in their little wooden houses next week. "Come next Thursday, bee operations should begin," my old friend assured me. Nine was the hour chosen, and, if fine, "us will have the masks, so that come a break-age the little brown folk can't come to us—and the vermin make sore flesh of us." To-day, as I went into the tool-house I heard the bees buzzing angrily, as if they could not keep quiet for anger.

"To-morrow," Burbidge then informed me, he and

the boys would paint all the "bees' homes over, save the lips, in different colours." These must, in his language, remain "simple;" but "come Thursday, us will take off the zinc stopper on each, and then the little brown uns can roam as they list."

All last winter, since November, the bees had lived in the tool-house, and had been artificially fed for the last fortnight, so that, to use my old friend's words, "they be fair nasty with temper, and buzzin' like an organ on fire." And now nothing remained but for Auguste, as he always did, to make them one last meal of burnt sugar, and solemnly to "*inviter ces messieurs à faire leur miel.*" Their appointed time of liberty was at hand, and in a few days the little brown folk would fly into the sunshine with pæans of joy.

I went into the tool-house with Burbidge. Burbidge is a man of order. Every night he makes "his boys" hang up the tools, after cleaning them with care. Those not in use shine brightly against the wall. Every night they are rubbed clean with a rag steeped in oil. Great strings of onions hung from the massive oak beams. During bad days in winter, when the snow lay on the ground, Burbidge and his men mended the fruit nets, painted the water-cans a brilliant red, or green, made wooden labels, and got ready, as they called it, "for the comin' of summer."

There, along one side, were the beehives, some eight in all—all to be painted in different colours. Burbidge holds the view that no two should be painted the same colour, so that each hive, as he calls it, "should drop on their own colour sharp." What truth there may be in this idea I cannot say, but I was delighted to oblige my old friend in this respect, for I, too, like bright colours in a garden.

Burbidge took out of an oak locker his colour board for the year. "I know, marm, as yer be tasty with a needle," he said, "and I'll leave it to you to say what pleases you and the brown folk most." I suggested shades of blue, and told him of the Scotch belief that bees of all colours love blue best. But Burbidge would not admit this. "I never heard *that* in Shropshire," he said stoutly. "Don't believe it, nor a letter of it. Orange or purple, I believe, be every bit as good as blue." Then I asked Burbidge about the old Shropshire bees that learned folks in bee-lore have told me were descended from the old wild bees that the British had, and of which there are still swarms in straw skeps in far-away farm-houses nestling against the Cleve. But about these wild bees Burbidge knew nothing, but only felt certain that anything "as be Shropshire born be bound to be good."

Then I chose the colours—red, flame, crimson, salmon, mauve, pink, the delicate shade of the autumn crocus, jonquil yellow, and one or two shades of blue—and particularly the dear old-fashioned *bleu de Marie* that one meets in an Italian sky, as beautiful in its way as the breast of "old Adam" (the peacock) against a yew hedge on a fine March morning in full sunlight.

It was a lovely spring morning on that Thursday, the appointed day for the removal of the bees to summer quarters.

Bess and I had a cup of milk and a slice of bread and butter, the best of all morning breakfasts, and ran out to see the sport. Burbidge was there with his boys, looking all of them like marauders, or moonlighters, for their faces were clothed with masks and their hands were covered with thick gloves.

Bess grasped tight hold of my hand. "Mamsie,

how wicked they look, as if they meant to kill some one," she whispered.

As to Mouse, she could not contain her displeasure. She gave a series of low growls, and, for all she knew them, did not like their coming too near us.

Burbidge propped back the garden gate with a stout staff. Then they carried the little wooden houses out. What an angry sound of buzzing went on inside, as the men bore them along. "Steady, steady!" cried Burbidge, in a tone of command, "or the little brown people will burst themselves with rage, and then, boys, it will be run for it who can."

After this note of warning, "the two boys" advanced very gently and placed the beehives in turn along the side of a path under the shade of an apple grove, and stood them facing south and east. "That be your home," said Burbidge, and then gravely proceeded to whisper "a charm." What that was I have never been able to discover, for Burbidge declared it to be a secret between him and the little brown 'uns, and if it was known the good would go with "gossamer wings." There is something about spring and blossom, and sun, and gentle rain, an old woman once told me, but the exact words old Nelly Fetch wouldn't tell me, and declared, like Burbidge, "that charms and rhymes were best kept between bees and bee-keepers, same as words to the bees when death had visited a family." It is believed in Shropshire that bees are canny, touchy folk, and that those who wish to keep them must be civil and knowledgeable, and, "plaize 'em as little sweethearts," as an old cottager once said to me, "or the bees wud mak' yer rue it."

"Whispering a death" is still a common custom. I remember once asking a farmer's wife, who used to be

noted for her bees, if she had any honey to sell, and being gravely told that she was out of bees, for that they had forgotten when the master died to whisper his death to them, and in consequence the bees had taken to the woods in displeasure.

Bess and I watched the proceedings, and when all the hives were fixed in their places, we put on old aprons and helped to daub on the paint. Burbidge had mixed little cans of each colour, pink, yellow scarlet, and flame, crimson, jonquil, and blue. Bess was delighted with the little pots and the brushes. "Mamsie, I am certain of one thing," she said, "paints are next best to water." And in a few moments the little face, hands, and pinafore, reflected all the colours of the rainbow.

In ten minutes or so, we had given each hive one coat of colour, and we never give more. Then we all went and stood at the other end of the garden to see the effect of our handiwork.

"Fine, very fine," exclaimed Burbidge, admiringly. "A horse in bells couldn't look smarter." And Bess added, "Mamsie, it's like a bunch of flowers, only there are no leaves." As we remained there, Auguste came on the scene. He appeared with a pail of syrup to feed the bees, for bees will always feed with avidity when put out first into the air, however dainty or reluctant they have been to eat when kept in confinement. A large bottle with a broad opening, full of thick syrup, was filled, and fixed upside down on the top of each hive. We heard behind the perforated zinc a mighty din. "Messieurs les abeilles crient pour leur diner," said Auguste.

Overhead was the sunshine, and the bees scented the breeze. Burbidge filled each bottle, and then replaced the wooden lid of each hive. "Stand back, marm!" he cried, "and you, too, Monsieur." Then

Burbidge called his "boys," and they removed the little pieces of zinc that had kept the bees so long prisoners. Out they flew with exultant hums and buzzes.

"They wud have liked to cut their way through," cried Absalom, "but zinc, for all their cunning, be the masters of they."

"They'll be contented now," laughed Burbidge. "Sugar and sunshine, what more can a bee desire?"

There is a great art in making bee syrup, like there is in doing most country things. Syrup should be clear and of the right thickness, and not too liquid; above all, it should not be too thin, so as to pass too quickly through the muslin, or, in Burbidge's words, "it would drown the bees like flies in a jar of cream."

After watching the bees come out and fly round in exultant joy, Bess and I returned to the house, for, as Bess said, the "bee play" was over for to-day. How busy the little brown people will be gathering fresh honey, flying amongst the arabis and searching for celandines and primroses.

We went in, and Bess ran up to her lessons. Alas! study to my little maid is always a period of sadness. "Real children never like lessons," is my little girl's dictum. They don't like useless things; and to Bess, French, geography, history, and music are all useless and worthless acquisitions. As I sat and embroidered in the Chapel Hall, I was suddenly told that a boy outside wished to speak to me. I left a carnation spray, a copy of a design of one of Mary Queen of Scots', and looked up to welcome Thady Malone, a little Irish lad, who, with his father and mother, had lately come into the parish.

Thady is the terror of the locality, and the hero of all the naughty-boy stories of the neighbourhood.

According to my old gardener, who looks at him with an evil eye, "Thady be more devil than boy." Burbidge declares that Thady is a plague, and a sore to the town, and "wull be the death of some 'un, unless he kills hisself first." The fact is, Thady has done every naughty thing conceivable. He has fired woods, put strings across roads, I have been told, to try and trip up his natural enemy, James Grogan, the reigning policeman, and even put logs across the little local line, I have been assured; but this he stoutly denies himself. He has been thrashed by indignant farmers for running their sheep, and yet, as Bess says, always turns up "naughty and nice," with the politest of manners, which he gets from "auld Oireland," and the sweetest and most innocent of baby faces out of which natural wickedness ever peeped.

A minute later and Thady stood before me, bare-legged and bonny, with an expectant smile in his eyes. I opened the conversation by asking him from where he came? "Right from Mrs. Harley." And he added, with a catch in his throat, "The poor lady is like to die entirely, judging by what Mrs. Betty said, and so I have come to you to see what your leddyship can do to stop the disease."

Thady spoke in the most engaging brogue, and he had the sunniest, pleasantest smile in the world. He stood before me, with his little bare feet shyly touching the fringe of the carpet.

No other child in the old town goes barefoot. He is known at Wenlock by the nickname of "Naughty Bare-legs," and has a shock of curly hair and dancing grey-blue eyes.

"I'll come at once," I said. "But why, Thady, have they sent you?"

Thady scratched his head and looked puzzled, declared he didn't know, but protested there was nothing he wouldn't do to oblige Mrs. Harley, for all, he averred, "she's a hathan, and never says a prayer to the blessed Virgin."

It appeared that once some naughty boys at Homer nearly succeeded in drowning Mrs. Harley's tortoiseshell kitten, but that Thady, hearing the poor little beast mew, fearlessly came to its rescue, fought his way through the thick of the band of miscreants, and told them they were nothing but base robbers, that they should be the death of something bigger; and before they had recovered from their surprise, had dashed through the ring, plunged out of the brook, and carried off poor pussie victoriously. After this, Mrs. Harley had always been a friend of his, filled his pockets with damsons in autumn, and apples, and when the world turned a cold shoulder on him, never failed to hold out to him the hand of friendship.

"For all I'm bad," Thady would say, with a twinkle in his eye, "Mrs. Harley never believes the worst of me, and says (God bless her!) the day will come when the country will be proud of me."

There was no time to be lost, so I followed the little bare-legged messenger out of the room, ran upstairs, put on my hat and cape, and whistled my great dog to heel. I said before starting, "Is there nothing I ought to take to her?"

Whereupon Thady answered impetuously, with the romance of his people, "There's just nothing at all. It's just your face, my leddy, which the poor body wants to get a sight of, considerin' it's never the shadow of the blessed Virgin that she can bless her eyes with."

So without another word, Thady and I passed out of

the Abbey, hurried across the emerald velvet of the Cloister lawn, and let ourselves out by the little side wicket, and so up the meadow past the station and away to the top of the hill. "I cannot run any more," at last I cried to Thady, who had set the pace. "We must walk. See, even Mouse is panting." Thady stopped, and then we settled down into a walk, and began after a few minutes to chat.

Thady looked at Mouse. "Proud I'd be, my leddy," he said, "if I owned such a dog. The constable, I'm thinking, would look a small man beside me then."

At this sally I had the ill-nature to suggest the constable could shoot Mouse. Whereupon Thady, with Hibernian readiness, replied, "Now I'm thinking the dog would bite first."

A little later a bird flew across the path, upon which Thady cried out, "A Kitty wren, begorra!" and before I could stop him, had picked up a pebble to throw at a little golden-crested wren that I saw running up a spray of yew.

"Stop, stop," I cried; "don't throw it."

"Why not?" said Thady. "There's no law in England or Oireland against killin' a wren, beside"—and he what the Shropshire folks call "rippled over" with laughter—"twould be a pretty shot."

But I begged him to desist, and Thady, who is civility itself, or, as he quaintly expresses it, "born dutiful entirely to a leddy," dropped his stone and we walked on. After a few minutes' conversation, I discovered that Thady Malone was a naturalist of no mean repute, that he could imitate the call and various notes of most of the wild birds, and that he knew where to find their nests. "And if it's after such," he added gallantly, "that yer fancy takes yer, I'll lead yer and show yer the

rarest birds that fly. Only wait another fortnight, pheasants, hawks, magpies, jays, blackcaps, blue-bonnets, Nanny washtails, heather lencies, red-poles, cutty wrens, corbie crows, Harry redcaps, and scores of others." Many of Thady's names I did not know, but Thady was graciously inclined, and assured me that he would "learn my leddyship the true names." "I don't call them after the books whatever," he asserted, "but same as the gipsy folks, and by the names known by the people that lived in London, and elsewhere, before us settled in Wenlock."

So it was agreed that Thady and I were to spend a day in the woods.

"Let it be Saturday," said Thady, authoritatively, "for then there's no school to plague the life out of a fellow. I can climb and you can cap," by which Thady meant that I was to carry the eggs.

"Thady," I said, as we parted at Mrs. Harley's wicket, "you must come for me some Saturday. We will go into the woods, and I will bring out luncheon, and you shall climb the trees, whilst I and Bess will search the ground; but we will take no nests, only look at them and see the eggs."

"Leave the eggs, and what for will her leddyship do that?" asked Thady, surprised. "That wud be like catching a hare and not finding it in the pot the night after."

"Well," I remonstrated, "when you come with me, you must play my game of bird-nesting. Anyway, I can promise there will be nothing sick, or sorry, where we have gone."

Thady at this laughed a little contemptuously, and a second later vanished behind a hedgerow, and I entered Mrs. Harley's cottage.

It was a lovely morning, bright and joyous. The air was full of spring odours, and in the song of the birds I only heard the echo of universal joy. Yet I knew, the moment I entered the cottage, that the hand of Death was about to beckon my old friend away from the good and useful life, that she had led so well and bravely, to the other side of the bourn from which no man returns.

Old Bessie met me. "Her's goin' fast," she whispered, and stood a moment in the sunlight, hot tears almost blinding her poor old eyes. Then, as I hesitated, she touched me gently on the arm and murmured, "Come up, come up. Glad her'll be to see you, for all her's done with Homer, and this world too." So I mounted the stairs and again found myself in Mrs. Harley's presence.

Outside beyond the Severn and the Wrekin, the sun was shining gaily. Inside the little chamber, all was spotlessly clean, I noted, as I entered the bed-chamber. I saw the dying woman wanted something, from the way in which her face moved.

"Light, light," she murmured as I touched her hand; and then, very low, "A fair day to go Home."

"Her's been talking of nothing but goin' home," said Betsy, reverently; "and her's goin' sure, same as gospel truth."

"All's at peace," whispered my old friend, and took a long, far look of the great hill of which all Shropshire men are so proud. So, smiling tenderly and loving the distant scene, her head sank back, and she seemed gently to fall asleep.

"How peaceful!" I said, awestruck.

"The Lord have a-called her, and her work be done," said Betty solemnly, a little later. "'Tis a good thing," she added, "to have done good work, and I think the

Lord loved her for all she was lowly and never trod in high places."

Then I left Betty, and the triumphant serene face, in the little whitewashed chamber. As I departed, I was conscious of having touched the fringe of a very holy garment.

I passed out. And as I met the gladness of the outside world, I knew that some of my old friend's radiance was still lighting my path. After all, I know no better or more blessed things than simple faith, and a noble life, ended by His supreme grace.

Mouse followed at my heels, dutifully walking close behind me. It is curious, the way in which a dog that is often our companion, reflects our mood. The great hound knew that I was absorbed, and gave way to no frolic, chased no rabbit, but kept near, watching me out of her topaz eyes solemnly and with marked concern.

A great stillness seemed to belong to the afternoon. The sun was hidden beneath tender lavender clouds. I crossed a stile and walked amongst the budding grass. Suddenly out of a wood, for the first time in the year, I heard the mystic voice of the cuckoo, calling, calling as if out of a dream.

What a delightful eerie sound it is! Not like a real bird, but like some voice from another world, with its strange power of reiteration, a voice which we cannot do otherwise than listen to; for, as Sir Philip Sidney said, "The cuckoo cometh to you with a tale to hold children from their play, and old men from the chimney corner." From all time men have loved his cry. In the "Exeter Book" occurs the passage—

"Sweet was the song of birds,
The earth was covered with flowers,
Cuckoos announced the year."

I did not see the bird, which lent enchantment to his song. I listened, with budding daisies at my feet, and over Wenlock spire a magic purple light. He seemed to me no bird, but a spirit calling to the world with a gladness that we cannot know. Death and winter must come, but for all that, spring is here, he seemed to say.

Death had come near me, even touched me half an hour ago, but for all the solemn sadness I felt a brief time ago, the joy of life seized me afresh.

As I wandered home across the peaceful fields, the Cuckoo's call seemed spoken and repeated from coppice to hedgerow, and in every mossy dingle. The old nursery rhyme I used to say in childhood came back to me—

“ In April
The Cuckoo shows his bill ;
In May
He sings all day ;
In June
He alters his tune ;
In July
Away he'll fly ;
Come August
Fly he must.”

Yes, I say, fly he must, with summer which is “ the sovereign joy of all things,” as Piers Ploughman wrote long years ago, and then autumn, and the long chill nights of winter.

There is always a mystery about the cuckoo, as to where he comes from, and where he goes. Far down in the south of India, I have been told, is the only place where the cuckoo is to be found summer and winter alike, calling in the tropics his strange, mystic cry. Be this as it may, he is never with us in Shropshire till the

second week in April, and vanishes like a ghost early in August.

Some days later, and it was Palm Sunday, one of the great festivals of old England during the Middle Ages.

There is but little sign left now of the blessing of the boughs, as the rite was performed in mediæval times, save that nearly all the boys present had cut sprigs of the wild willow and placed them in their button-holes, and my little maid, by her old Nana's wish, had a spray pinned in also, amongst the ribbons of her hat. What a lovely blossom it is, that of the wild willow. How delicate the soft grey, and how lovely the brilliant shades of gold. How wonderful is the mixture of both colours, and how exquisitely gold and grey melt into each other.

As I sat in our pew on the northern side of the church, I thought of the old Church Service that once was held there. After the Mass, I have read, it was usual that there should follow the hallowing of the branches and flowers by the priest. I thought, as I sat in church in Protestant England, of how the priest, up to the first half of the sixteenth century, and for long centuries before, stood forth in scarlet cope and blessed the sweet branches and the first flowers of the year. I liked to recall the old rite and custom of entreating the Almighty to bless and sanctify "his creatures," by which was meant branch and blossom, which were laid by lay brothers and novices at the foot of the altar, and then it was nice to think how branch and blossom were broken up and blest, and a spray given to all the devout people assembled. It was a pretty and holy usage, and I could not but feel regret, that so gracious a rite was lost. It must have been a delightful service for little children to witness, and a sweet memory for the

old who could remember the happy springs of years gone by.

As we came out of church, I told Bess about the old custom. And Bess said dryly, "Now we have to bless our palm branches ourselves;" and added with the strange intuition of a child, "I think it was better when God did part of it, don't you, mamsie?"

After the service, we took a stroll into the picturesque old churchyard, surrounded by old black and white timber, and Georgian houses of glowing red brick. There was standing by the door by which we entered the church, the remains of an old stone cross and several tombs, which, I have been told, were brought from the ruined Abbey Church. The grass was full of glittering daffodils, which shone like stars, and the scent from the ribes and Daphne bushes filled God's acre with sweetness. Bess and I walked round the churchyard.

I told her of the little room over the church-porch with its little narrow window. Such a holy little room, I said. In such a room, I think, holy Master George Herbert must have written; and from that I went on to tell my little girl about Sir Thomas Botelar, the first priest who lived at Much Wenlock after the expulsion of the monks.

"Tell me about him," said Bess, eagerly. "I like to hear about good monks and priests from you, although Nana says they were all wicked, and walled up poor girls. But perhaps," added Bess, thoughtfully, "they were not all as wicked as she thinks; leastways, there may have been a few good ones just sometimes."

After luncheon I took down the printed sheets in which are preserved Sir Thomas Botelar's entries, for, alas! his original manuscript perished in the great fire at Wynnstay in 1859. And I read aloud such passages

as I thought my little girl would follow, at least in places.

As I read aloud, Constance was ushered in. She did not know Sir Thomas's register and begged me to go on reading, so I continued to read. The old papers, I told her in a pause, embraced eight years of Henry VIII.'s reign, went through that of Edward VI.'s, took in the whole of Queen Mary's, and gave the four opening years of Queen Elizabeth's reign. All Sir Thomas's sympathies were with the old order of things, I begged her to remember, and then I went on reading.

"'In February, 1546, on the 5th day of the month, word and knowledge came to the borough of Much Wenlock that our Sovereign Lord King Henry VIII. was departed out of this transitory life, whose soul,' " Sir Thomas added, "' God Almighty pardon.' "

"Sir Thomas Botelar," I told Constance, "was the last Abbot of St. Peter and St. Paul's Monastery at Shrewsbury. After the Dissolution, the King turned away all the monks, and Sir Thomas became, after a short time, Vicar of Much Wenlock, but his heart remained in the cloisters of his former abbey."

Then I turned to a notice a little further down the page—

"'On the 13th April of the same year three convicts were buried, and one was a child of eleven.' Poor little girl," I said, "what a terrible bald statement of misery! What could so young a child have done to merit death?"

"I cannot think," exclaimed Bess. "Perhaps cursed and swore and scratched; but, even then, had she no father or mother to forgive her?"

"Only God," said Constance, softly.

And then I begged them to listen to an account of a



SIR THOMAS BOTELER'S HOUSE.

Photo by Mr. W. Gulliver.



funeral of an excellent priest, and obviously a very learned man.

“‘Sir William Corvehill, priest,’” I read, “‘was laid in a tomb of lime and stone, which he had caused to be made for himself. Sir W. Corvehill was excellently and singularly expert in divers of the VIJ liberal sciences, especially in geometry. He was also skilled in the making of organs and in the carving of masonry, in the weaving of silk, and in printing. Besides he was,” adds Sir Thomas, “‘a very patient man and full honest in his conversation and living.’” Then, after commending his soul to the care of God, Sir Thomas wound up quaintly by declaring that, “‘All this country hath a great loss from the death of Sir William Corvehill, for he was a good bell-founder and a maker and framer of bells.’”

Then I found a notice of a marriage. “‘Here was married,’” ran the old register, “‘Thomas Munslow Smith and Alice Nycols;’” and added, “‘The bride was wedded in her smock, and barehead.’”

“When I’m married,” said Bess, loftily, “I’ll have a veil and some flowers. Nana says it isn’t proper to be married without a veil. ’Twould be as silly as papa ploughing, or you, mama, plucking fowls.”

I didn’t enter into the question of parental ridicule, but I looked down the vicar’s entries and read, “‘Poor Sir John Baily Clerke, otherwise called John Cressage, died. It was about 9 of the clock,’” wrote Sir Thomas, “‘and at the manor place of Madeley.’”

Bess had often heard the story from me of the poor old man who, after surrendering his monastery, retired broken-hearted to die at Madeley. When I came to this part of the register, she broke out indignantly with—

“Why couldn’t they leave *our* abbot alone? I can’t abear that old Henry VIII. He did nothing but wicked

things : cut off his wives' heads and pulled down churches and nice buildings. Yet Nan and Burbidge call him a good man. I think people ought to be good in a different way."

Bess was quite excited, and Constance had to take her on her knee to soothe her, and thus she sat on listening, with a scarlet face.

Then I read how, after the death of King Edward, Sir Thomas and all the people made great joy over the proclaiming of the Lady Mary Queen of England. I read also how the people of Bridgnorth "fair cast up their caps and hats, lauding, thanking, and praising God Almighty, with ringing of bells and making of bonfires in the streets," and how the same joy was evinced at Shrewsbury, and at Much Wenlock.

In the first year of Mary's reign on June 16th, I read that the altar of our blessed Lady within this church (of the Holy Trinity) was again built up and consecrated afresh, and evidently Sir Thomas rejoiced.

A month later, the Bishop of Worcester, the Lord President of the Marches, coming with Justice Townesynde, stopped on their road to Bridgnorth at Much Wenlock, and were entertained by Richard Lawley at the Ash, the fine old timber house in Spital Street, where, at a later date, Charles I. and Prince Rupert both slept on different occasions.

Then followed a description of the *fête* held in their honour. We learnt how the house was gaily decked with cloths of Arras, with the covering of beds, bancards, carpets and cushions, and how the table was laden with pears and dishes of apples of the previous year. We wondered how they could have been kept. Also with cakes, fine wafers, claret, sack and white wine, and after much pleasant feasting and pleasant intercourse, how

"Mr. Justice rose and gave the Burgesses great and gentle thanks for their cost and cheer."

"I wish that I, too, mamsie, had been there, for I, too, would like to have eaten pears in summer, and have seen all their gay carpets," exclaimed Bess.

A little later on in the pamphlet I found the announcement of Queen Elizabeth's being proclaimed Queen after the death of her sister. Sir Thomas made this entry evidently with rather a heavy heart.

As I closed the little book, Constance took it in her hand and looked over the pages.

"How many were hanged in those days!" she said sadly. "There are mentions of executions for sheep stealing, for murder, for robbery; and what a number of convicts, even children of quite tender years."

Then she alluded to the immense age of many of the parishioners named. Agnes Pyner was said to be seven score years when she received the blessed sacrament just before death. John Trussingham declared that he was seven score years, and that at the age of four-score years he had witnessed the battle of Blore Heath; whilst John Francis, chief farmer at Callaughton, Sir Thomas declared, was aged 107 years when he was buried.

Then Constance's fingers flitted back to a past page, and she read aloud a touching little entry about Joan of Posenhall, a fair maiden of twenty-two years, who, it was believed, "died of a canker in the mouth, which disease her father ascribed to the smelling of rose flowers."

"Could it have been a poisoned rose?" I asked, for in those days many and subtle were the poisons used to get rid of a fair rival.

But Bess could not understand how a rose by its scent could injure any one. "In my true fairy-stories,"

she said, "roses can only do good. They are only good fairies' gifts, and I know they can only come out of the mouths of good girls—real good girls," Bess repeated, "so I don't see how a rose could have hurt poor Joan."

Whereupon I explained matters to my little maid. After a pause Bess exclaimed—

"Well, I think 'tis best to live now, for anyhow we've only doctors to kill us."

"To save us," laughed Constance.

But Bess would not allow this. "To kill us is what Mrs. Burbidge says; and Nana says she won't have a doctor in at no price for herself."

Then Bess jumped up from her chair, and declared inconsequently that it was time to feed her puppy, and darted out of the room, and Constance and I were left alone. Upon which we fell to chatting about the great quilt. "I have chosen the flowers, as you know," she said. And she enumerated one after another their old-world musical names. "And now I want charming words about sleep," she added.

I suggested from Sir Thomas Browne's "Religio Medici": "Make my sleep a holy trance," or "On my temples sentry keep," again from the same author "Come as thou wilt, or what thou wilt bequeath," from Drummond of Hawthornden, or again, "Men like visions are, Time all doth claim," or "He lives who dies to win a lasting fame."

"You must not also," I said, "forget a beautiful line from Mrs. Barrett Browning: 'He giveth His beloved sleep.'"

Before leaving me, Constance told me that she and Bess had a little game in hand—a real May frolic—"but you must not know yet, it must be a surprise."

To this I at once gave my maternal sanction, and

then the nature of the "secret" was revealed to me. Constance told me that she proposed to have a little May dance for some eight of the little school maidens, and that she would like Bess to take a part in the festivities. Eight little maidens are to dance round the maypole, which is to be decked with ribbons and many flowers, and are to sing some old songs ; and she added, "If you have no objection, Bess is to say us a verse or two from some old poets in honour of May morning."

I fell in readily with Constance's little plans for a village *fête*, and offered the old bowling green as a site for it to take place. "The bowling green," I said, "is very sheltered ; it is surrounded on three sides with yew hedges, and I am delighted at the idea of Bess appearing as the queen of the revels."

Bess is to be attired all in white with a crown of flaming marsh marigolds on her head, and to bear in her hand a staff decorated with primroses, cowslips, and sprays of beech and willow.

Just as Constance was leaving, Bess rushed in and seized my friend's hand, and called out impetuously, "Have you told mamsie ? May I ? May I ?"

I nodded "yes," and told my little maid that she was to have a white muslin, a white wand of office, posies of primroses and shining shoe buckles. Bess was delighted, she hugged me and Constance rapturously in turns, and said "it will be the best day of my life."

"All we must hope will be a success," laughed Constance, as she departed up the pathway to the old gate-house ; "and we must pray for sunshine for the sake of the little expectant maidens and anxious mothers."

Next morning I confided to Burbidge the plan of our proposed revels, and informed him that I should like to

ask in the villagers. Burbidge remarked in a lofty way that he had no objection—a Yorkshire expression which he acquired when a lad from a Yorkshire gardener; but added severely, that they that come must keep to the paths, not spoil *his* lawns, and scatter no lollipop papers, or such-like dirt.

But Burbidge's old wife, Hester, showed a less conciliatory spirit. In a foolish moment, as I happened to meet her carrying Burbidge's dinner to the tool-house, I confided our secret. Upon which she told me sourly that she was sorry to think "as there is to be play-acting, and even dancing on the property—the monks," she declared, "were bad enough, but this would beat all."

Hester is descended from old Puritan stock, and disapproves of all laughter and merriment. Burbidge, who overheard her last words of censure, exclaimed—

"Tut, tut, my dear, you was young once. I can mind thee fine as a horse in bells, for all thee's old now and that the rheumatics lay hold on thee, sharp as scissor points. But the young uns they want their games and their plays, for all as us is getting miller's bags on our pates."

"Speak for yourself," replied Hester, with acidity, puckering up her withered visage. And then she added with severity, "I never knew yet any good come out, or wisdom, of play-acting. They be devil's works, and take my word for it," and there she held up a bony emphatic finger, "that the devil will claim toll, for all as they seem mild and innocent."

With which ominous remark Hester made over to Burbidge his dinner, and hobbled up the back drive homeward.

"'Tis a pity," said Burbidge, looking after his old wife, "as good wine can turn to vinegar like that. The

Lord made her, but the old 'un " (the devil) " guides her eyesight sure enough, and most times directs her tongue. The fact is," and the old man drew himself up straight, " when yer think too much about hell, yer can never see heaven. My mother used to say that, and for all she was a Methody body, it be gospel truth."

A few days later it was Easter Sunday. The bells rang merrily, but we hurried off to church almost late; for, according to Shropshire fashion, Bess had got a new frock on for the occasion.

It consisted of a pale mauve serge of the colour of the autumn crocus blossoms which flower in the after-math in this neighbourhood.

For the last fortnight dear old Nanny had been too busy "to draw a breath," to use her favourite expression, and had sewn morning, afternoon, and evening, to get my little maid's frock completed by Easter Sunday. For it is held in Shropshire to be most unlucky not to be clad in fresh attire on that feast day of the Church. Wherefore, whatever else was left undone, Bess's frock had to be finished for the festival.

"The rooks," murmured Bess, as we entered the churchyard, "cannot say nothing, for all I have is new—shoes, stockings, drawers, chemise, and frock. And them," alluding to the rooks, "them only spoils old things, does them, mamsie?"

"Oh, you're safe," I laughed, and we passed up the aisle.

A peal of bells was ringing gaily. "How gay and good it sounds," whispered Bess, dreamily, "as if all the world was good and playing." Then we walked up to our pew, and the mild delicate scent of primroses greeted us everywhere. "I wish we had flowers every Sunday," said Bess, as she flumped down in her seat.

"It seems to make God's house like a posy. I think it must be nicer for Him so." The old columns were festooned with garlands of flowers, and round the ancient font were placed bunches of flashing marsh marigolds and great branches of tender half-uncurled beech leaves.

Bess looked round her, and said gravely in an undertone, "I think the blessing will come this Sunday, for I feel sure that God cannot see so many flowers about without being pleased." Then I said, "Hush!" for I feared my little maid was talking over-much.

Immediately after, the morning service began. At the close, as the last hymn died away, Nana took my little maiden off, whilst I remained on for the most beautiful, and the most solemn, of all our Church services.

The sound of retreating footsteps was at last hushed. The children had all left, and many of the people. Then there was a pause, and then the opening prayers, and I saw, in the dim light of the chancel window, the vicar breaking the bread and preparing the wine, and we were invited to the Lord's Table.

"The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life." I seemed to hear the solemn words as in a trance. Outside, through the old perpendicular window, the sun was shining faintly, and from the glad world without I heard the birds singing in a joyous chorus. Inside, the great and solemn rite of Christianity was being administered, and faith and love of Him who died for the sins of men was visiting each faithful heart in a rapture of holy delight. A few minutes afterwards and I regained my seat. The spirit of the old world was with me. How many pious hearts have offered up prayer and thanksgiving before those altar rails! How

often has the blessed Sacrament come to faithful hearts, as an elixir of the soul !

Owing, perhaps, to the joy of the world outside, there was a great sense of triumph in such an Easter Sunday. "Christ is risen!" seemed to be shouted everywhere; His body had suffered pain and death, but now the heavens were opening for the glory in which death and pain could have no place. The glory of His life was everywhere. For "with angels, and archangels, and with all the company of heaven," could "we laud and magnify our Lord and praise the Most High."

I came out of the church, and some of its mystic radiance seems to cling like a cloud of splendour around me. As I walked along, I thought of the founder of the town church, Roger de Montgomery, the great Earl of Shrewsbury, who founded also that of the Abbey close by. The former, dedicated to the Holy Trinity, still has its roof, and pious services are still performed there every Sunday; whereas the Abbey church of the Clugniac monks is deserted alike by prior and pilgrim. Alone, my pigeons and the jackdaws fly amidst its aisles, and only across grass and thyme can the outlines of the high altar be discerned.

I lingered at the church wicket. A soft shower had just fallen, and dew-drops glistened on the grass like pearls. A great white cross shone in splendour, still wet, but of dazzling whiteness, almost like a pillar of light in the morning sunshine. The birds on every bush and wall were chanting anthems of delight.

A minute later I passed out of God's acre, and Bess met me in the avenue. My little maid rushed up with a bound of excitement.

"Thady is ill, mum," she cried. "I heard Burbidge

tell Nana so. He said 'The little varmint be down with a bad leg, and he hoped that would settle him for a bit.' And Nana said 'she hoped it would, too, for when boys were wicked they was best in bed.' But I'm sorry, sorry, for all Thady's naughty, he's never nasty." I sympathized with Bess, and promised that we would visit Thady during the afternoon.

After luncheon, we cut Thady a slice of plum-pudding, and Bess put aside for him an Easter-egg. "I had three," she said, "and this one is sky blue, and Auguste says that is the best colour of all and sure to bring good luck. So you'll see, mum," she added, "Thady will be right again and able to climb the trees in no time after he has eaten my egg."

We prepared to start out, and took Thady the gifts contained in the basket; but Bess declared that first we must go into the ruins and pick her little friend a bunch of daffydownhillies.

"A bunch of daffs on Easter Day
Brings luck to the house, and peace in May.'

"Nan says so, and I believe it," cried Bess. "Anyway, Thady will like to look at 'em while he eats my egg." So we wandered into the rough grass inside the ruined church to pluck a handful.

How beautiful are spring flowers. All round it was a blaze of brilliant blossoms. There were early Van Thol tulips, like flames of fire, large rings of golden daffodils, some of them with almost orange faces moving in the soft winds, and then there were patches of beautiful blue scilla sibirica, and in the distance the star-like forms of the narcissi Stella, and Cynosure.

For several autumns Burbidge and "his boys" had planted for me great numbers of bulbs, and the

result was, as Burbidge said, better "than a carpet of delight." These bulbs are now grown largely in Lincolnshire, and in parts of Ireland. When they arrived they looked small and meagre. They were not at all the splendid, sleek, fat bulbs, that come from Holland; but, to quote Burbidge, looked "poor little shy customers;" but they were glad enough to find a home in the Abbey turf. Before putting them in, we skinned back the grass, dug up the soil to about six inches, added a little leaf mould, took out any stones, and popped in tulips, daffodils, snowdrops, crocuses, and, for a later radiance when the hawthorn would be out in snow, the rich double white narcissus, that gardeners call, on account of its perfume and appearance, the gardenia narcissus.

We put in three to five bulbs in each little space. After which we carefully replaced the grass, and beat it well down, so that, after the first shower, no one could have known that we had even moved the turf. Just then much of the grass of the ruins was a sheet of glory, reminding me in its *parterre*-like beauty of the foreground of some early Italian painter.

Every autumn Burbidge and his workers bring wheelbarrow loads of leaf mould and decayed lawn grass, and spread them over my "bulb forest;" and the result is that every year the flower roots strengthen, and the blossoms multiply.

Bess ran from group to group, until her hands were full of different daffodils. "There's luck here," she cried, "and see, they glitter like gold money, mamsie—that must mean something good."

We walked, laden with our gifts, till we reached the Bull Ring. We paused at the door of an old black and white house, with a broad pebble causeway

before it. On entering the cottage we found Thady in bed.

"Well, Thady, how did it happen?" I said.

"I was after a rook's nest," replied Thady, "and the twig gave way entirely, and so I came down dangswang, as the folks say here."

"Indade," said his mother, Mrs. Malone, "it's afflicted I am in Thady. When he's good he's ill, and when he's well he keeps company entirely with the Devil."

"Never fear, mother, whatever. 'Tis a bad boy as can't get good some day," and Thady, for all his face looked white and worn from pain, he burst into an irresistible fit of laughter.

Upon this Bess showered upon him yellow daffodils, and I opened my basket containing the plum-pudding, and Bess's sky-blue egg, and an orange or two.

"Sure and God bless you," said the good dame, his mother, with enthusiasm. "They will please him finely, for Wenlock is as dull as ditch water, for all they boast that in days gone by once there was gay goings on here. Bull and dog baitings, according to our old neighbour Timothy Theobalds' tales, and behind the Vicarage, cock matches fit for a king, and pretty fights between the young men behind the church. But, whatever there was then, 'tis still now, and sleepy as Time."

As we left the cottage I met the neighbour of the Malones, old Timothy Theobalds. He was a shrivelled little old man, had been ount, or mole-catcher, for many years, had driven cattle to market, and I have also heard, was once earth-stopper to the Hunt. If what his neighbours say is true, old Timothy is not now far off a hundred. He receives annually a small pension collected from three county families, has, I am told, cakes

and beer at Yule-tide from his neighbours, and in his own words, "a snap of somethin' tasty, when he has a mind, wherever he goes." The old man is excellent company for all his years, and has many a good story to tell, of folks long since dead, and of the wild ways and curious customs of old Shropshire, before the days of railroads, when folks still believed in witches, and in the power of divining rods, and danced, and made merry at wakes and fairs. Like many other old men, "Daddy" Theobalds is not exempt from grumbling, and can use language, I fear, "fit to blow your head off" if provoked. According to him, "Life's a poorthin' now. No fun nor luck left. Yer mayn't even get a shillin' nowadays for a vote if so be as yer has one; though what good a vote can do a poor man if he can't sell it, I don't know. They Radicals," he told me once, "were grand at givin'; but their gifts were nought but mugs wi'out beer, or dishes wi'out beef; they brought nought when yer speered in, but fandangles, flummery and folly."

Old Timothy I met leaning on his stick before his door, clad in a long embroidered smock. He pushed open the door. "Come in, marm," he says, "and sit yer down before the fire."

I entered his house whilst Bess dashed off to fetch the pug-pup, exclaiming, "We must remember it is his Easter Sunday," and I and old Timothy were left alone.

I made a remark upon the fine day, and told old Timothy about the morning service and the lovely flowers. Old Timothy did not respond. He holds to church on Sunday, but rather as a preparation to a Sunday dinner, than anything else, I fear; but as to flowers, he "doesn't think much of they, leastways not in churches."

"When I war a lad," he said, "folks kept they for May Day, and the lads and lasses then went out and pulled blossoms and danced, for the fun of the land wasn't all dead then, as it is now. That be the proper use of blows." Then, after a pause, in a weary voice old Timothy went on to say, "'Tis a deal decenter now, no doubt, more paint about and print readen', but the fun and jollity be clean dead. When I war young, folks often had a tidy bit saved, and when they had 'a do' they spent it at home. The missus would bake Yule-tide cakes or all souls, or snap-jacks, accordin' to the season, and the maister brewed a barrel of ale, and then the couple wud call in the neighbours. Now 'tis hoard up, and go away, as if yer could only laugh in London or Birmingham, and never a cake or a sup for friends or neighbours.

"Folks could play well enough when I war a boy," and then old Timothy began to tell me of the old "plays" as he called them. "This place, 'Old Wenlock,' as us used to call it, war cheery, and jolly, in grandam's days," he told me. "Every spring there wud come a man with a bull. Many is the one, I have heard her say, was baited in this spot, just outside the doors. The farmers and colliers from Ironbridge would bring their dogs, and have three days' drinking and amusement. And," continued old Timothy, "he war a mighty fine man as cud count as his the best bull dog about. Now folks be proud of their cricket, and of their football matches, but the games can't touch the old sports." Then after a pause, old Timothy said solemnly, "It war a terrible undoing of England puttin' down the old plays. I mind," the old man added, "how mad dad war when they put down the bull-baiting at Ellesmere. There used, in the old times, to be grand goings on there.

Well, one Wake Monday, Mr. Clarke, 'the captain' as they called him, put that down. Tom Byollin, I've heard dad say, war leaden' the bull round pretty nigh smothered in ribbons, as war the good old custom, when the captain 'e comes up and 'e said, 'What be goin' to do with that there bull?' 'Bait 'im,' said Tom, 'we allus bait a bull at Wake's. 'Tis our Christian custom.' But the captain he wudn't have it. He war allus a meally souled 'un, 'cording to dad, and one that left a good custom, to take up with a new one, and so he offered five pounds to Tom, and got round him by biddin' too a new pair of breeks—and so there war no bull-baiten. Tom was mortal hard up, I've heard, but to his dyin' day he regretted the job, and used to cry over his cups, because he had helped to ruin the land by doin' away with a good old practice."

"Did you ever see a bull baited?" I asked old Timothy.

"Yes, mam," answered my old friend with pride, "when I war at Loppington, I have myself seen the sport, as quite a lad," and as he spoke old Timothy's eyes lighted up with excitement. "It war a royal do. For they had not only bulls, but bears. I mind me," he continued after a minute's hesitation, "as it war in 1825. There war great rejoicin's. Folks druv and came in from all parts, and it war a grand celebration, and all given because the parson's daughter war marryin' a squire. They said as the parson paid the costs hisself bang off, he was that pleased at his daughter's grand marriage. But then parsons *were* parsons in those days. They rode, shot, and wrestled, besides preachin'. 'Tis true as there war a few what objected. Now at Madeley Wakes they had grand games on too. All the colliers, I've heard grandam say, used to come

down and bet free and easy, like gentlemen born. Many was the time, I've heard 'em say, folks used to see the collier folks ranged down to make a lane like for the bull or bear to pass along. My word! as old Matt Dykes used to say. It war a mighty question which looked best, beast or dog, for when 'twas a bull, they only slipt one to a time. 'One dog one bull,' that war what they used to say to Madeley.

"Oaken-Gates; I've heard say, war the last place where they baited the bull in Shropshire. And I allus say," said old Timothy, with a spark of enthusiasm, "that 'tis a mighty fine feather in the cap of that place, as it war the last as kept up the good old English sport."

Then old Timothy went on to tell me "how the bull in 1833 at Madeley war a mighty game 'un, and tugged that ferocious at the stake, that he broke abroad stake and all, and with the chain charged down madly, and hurted several what war standing by."

After a pause, old Timothy went on to tell me, "how for all the Vicar of Loppington war reasonable and right minded about the old sports, there war some even then, as had 'cakey' and queasy stomachs about such enjoyments." And he went on to say how Mr. Anstice of Madeley, and one Mortimer, as was vicar then, spoilt, in his own language, sport cruel. "It war in this way," continued the old man, "the bull, a proper beast, war baited three times; first, at the Horse Inn, then at Lincoln Hill, and lastly, on Madeley Wood Green. At the last bout, Squire Anstice and Parson Mortimer they comed up with a handful of constables, but there war hundreds of colliers and decent folks looking on, and I war told that they could have chawed up constables, squire, and vicar, if they had a mind."

"And what saved 'em?" I asked eagerly.

"Well," answered Maister Theobalds, "for all the vicar war a little 'un deformed, and some called him as dry as a chip, he had a mighty fine tongue, and though he'd hadn't grit enough to thresh a hen, he'd hadn't no mortal fear, and he stood up and pleaded and spoke same as if the bull had been his brother. And the bull war sent away."

Then after a little while Timothy added reflectively, "There be mountains in a tongue. Grandam used to say as Parson Mortimer seemed to hold God Almighty inside him when he war angry, so terrible war he, not that he ever war angry unless he waxed white hot about sin, or cruelty, as he called it. He war a little 'un to look at, but he had a mighty spirit, though lamb-like to pups, childers, and wild wounded things. The biggest fellows quailed before him when he took on in a rampage, and none of them dared sin when he war by."

At that moment I heard my Bess tapping at the door. "Lor, bless her," said Timothy, "'tis the little 'un; how them does grow, the childers," and he got up and hobbled to the door. Then Bess ran in and bubbled over with excitement about her May *fête*, for she had met Constance on the road. She told old Master Theobalds that he must come down and see her May dance. "Sure I will, my pretty," he said; "I'd like to see a May-stang again, and a mass of lads and lasses dancing round, as I have heard grandam talk about when she war a likely wench."

Then the old man began to tell us of the old May Days, and of the long-handed-down traditions of the Shropshire May festival.

"It war the fashion," he said, "in the old time for all the lads and lasses to wend their way to the Stanhill

Coppice or down to the great Edge Wood, and a merry time they had. Old Gregson Child as war shepherd to Farmer Dawson, that lived once at the Marsh Farm, used to go with the lads, and they used to blow horns, and one or two, if they had a mind, would tootle on the flute, and others scrape on fiddles, till wood and field fair swarmed with music, and so, they say, they got them to the woods an hour or so after dawn. And after a while, the lads and lasses would twine garlands, and the lads would buss the lasses. And the lasses would cry out, but let 'em do it again, and when they had romped and sang, the boys and maids, fair smothered in May branches, mead marigolds, posies of primroses, and laxter shoots of beech and hazel, would get them to their homes and hang up garlands and posies to their lintels over their dad's door, and take to laughter and bussing again.

"Ay, grandam used to talk of those times—merry times for all they hung for sheep stealing, sure enough, but the lads laughed 'twixt times gay as ecalls," and the old man bent before the dying fire, and seemed in thought to plunge back to the days of the past, which even he could hardly have seen.

Then Bess and I got up, and Mouse gave a deep bark, and as I said good-bye, I repeated my invitation for the First of May.

"Lor', mam," replied old Timothy, sadly, as he opened the door, "it isn't likely as I shall forget it, for a piece of jollity don't often come my way. 'Tis dull and parson-like as they've made the world now. Well, it is for the young 'uns to call for the tune now."

We passed into the sunlight, and saw the lads and lasses hastening to school, and away up the streets I

saw older lads and lasses in Sunday trim, dressed for courting, and the Sunday walk.

Is the world less merry, I asked myself, since old Timothy's grandam danced beneath the May-pole? Have we forgotten how to laugh and sing in village and hamlet, and is merry England steeped in grey mists? I thought of what I had heard, as I walked along, and tried to picture to myself that merry England of whom a stranger wrote, "A merrier, gayer people breathe not on God's earth." I thought of the time when the May Festival was observed by nobles, and even by kings and queens. I remembered how Chaucer, in his "Court of Love," tells us that early on May Day "went forth all the Court, both most and least, to fetch fresh flowers, and so bring back branch and bloom."

"O Maye with all thy flowers, and thy green,
Bright welcome, be thou faire, freshe May,"

exclaims the courtly knight Arcite. I recalled a passage in Malory where the great prose poet makes beautiful Queen Guinevere go a-maying with her lords and ladies. In Henry VIII.'s reign the Court still went a-maying, for Hall tells us how Henry, in his youth, accompanied by his stately Spanish queen, "rose up early with all their courtiers" to enjoy the old English custom, and of how the Court went forth with bows and arrows, shooting through the green spring woods, and brought back "flowers and branches." Shakespeare, in his "Midsummer Night's Dream," alluded to the old English holiday, and declares, through the mouth of one of his characters, that folks would not lie abed the last day of April, but rose up early to observe this rite of May, so eager were they for its fun. So keenly did Queen Bess enjoy these revels

that she always longed, it is said, to lay aside the state of royalty on these occasions, and live the life of a milkmaid during the month of May.

Towards the close of the Elizabethan era, Stubbs wrote, sourly attacking all such practices. In an old brown, mouldy book by him, that I once came across in an old country house library, entitled "Anatomie of Abuses," I read a jaundiced account of a May festival.

"The Chiefest Jewel that they bring from the woods," he wrote, "is their May-poole, which they bring home in great veneration in this wise." And then the old Puritan went on to recount how "tweentie to fourtie yoke of oxen were harnessed together, and how a sweet posie of flowers was tied to the typee of their horns, and so the oxen drew home the May-poole."

Thinking over old-fashioned customs, it was impossible not to lament there is now left, to quote an old chronicler's quaint expression, "so little worshipful mirth" in England, and that villages no longer have their dances and May Day rejoicings, as in years gone by. It cannot be other than a matter of regret to all reflective minds, that the one notion of pleasure amongst our working classes, is to sit long hours in an excursion train, and, be it said, invariably to leave their own homes.

Hospitality amongst the poor, save for a wedding or a christening, has become a thing of the past. Love-spinning, soul-caking, and well-dancing are all gone by. And England is a poorer country, I think, in that it is no longer Merrie England, as it was in the days of the Tudors and the Stuarts, but the England of many chimneys—in others words, the Workshop of the World.

Soft days followed Easter Sunday. The weather

was exquisite sunshine and shower making a perfect combination. Burbidge was always busy. There was continually the summer sound of mowing. No longer, alas! the rhythmic swish of the scythe, but the twinkling click of the machine. Yet even this was delightful, for in the sound came the cry of summer. Everywhere the heads of the herbaceous plants in the border grew bolder and stronger. The beautiful burning bush, as my old gardener calls the *Dictamnus Fraxinella*, was then a foot high; and my white Martagon lilies and *Lilium Auratum* were all springing up gaily from their mother earth strong and vigorous; whilst my Oriental poppies, of various colours, were rearing themselves up for a June glory. Then my pansies (the seed of which I had brought from Paris a year ago) were full of promise. How rich they will be, I said, blotched and mottled in different shades of purple, lavender, and chocolate brown, and each flower later will have a face of its own, with an almost human expression. Besides these, there were Hen and Chicken daisies, or red and pink Bachelor's Buttons, as they call them in Shropshire, and opening sprays of Bouncing Bess (which is our local name for the gay Valerian), wherever it could push its way between the old stone walls.

I wandered round the garden in the Cloisters, with its lavabo and wrought-iron gates. On the lancet windows of the Leper's Chamber, white pigeons were cooing and disporting themselves, and running up and down along the level turf. Jackdaws amidst the ruins were hurrying to and fro on the wing, with grub or insect in their beaks. Above the chamber, where men said the service was heard by the sick, there was a mass of gold which shone like beaten metal against the

cloudless sky. It was the wild wallflower in a sea of blossom. How busy all nature was—building, growing, blossoming, and budding. Certainly a fair spring morning is one of the undying joys of the world.

Later on I found myself in the little kitchen garden. The later pears were then sheets of snow, and I noticed that an apple flower was beginning to turn pink on an espalier.

Burbidge I found busily occupied in dividing the roots of the violets.

All through the winter, when frosts bound the ground, he sent me in fragrant bunches of the double Neapolitan violet, varied by bouquets of the Czar, the Princess of Wales, and the red purple of Admiral Avalon.

Now all the roots were being lifted from the frames, and little runners with minute fibrous roots planted, some eight inches apart, in shady corners.

During the summer, Burbidge and his boys will cut off every runner or blossom that may appear on these plants, and keep them, to use his expression, "round as a nest." "I likes," he said, "to give 'em hearts like cabbages." The first week in September, the violet roots will be replaced in the frames "for winter blowing."

In the mean time the frames are to be cleared, the soil renewed, and then sown with asters, zinnias, and my beautiful golden lettuces, that come over every year from the Austrian seedsman.

Next to the frames, in little narrow beds, were lines of choice daffodils, and I stopped to look at them. They were of the largest and most effective kinds. There was Emperor, and Empress, Horsfieldi, Sir Watkin Wynn, Golden Spur, Mrs. Langtry, and beautiful Madame de Graaf, and the brilliant sunset glory of Orange Phoenix.



Photo by Frith.

THE ABBEY RUINS.

They made a brave show and found great favour in my old gardener's eyes. "Nothing mean about they," he said, only the day before, complacently to me. "Look to the size. They be near the girth of roses, and fit for any nobleman's garden." The old man seemed to swell with pride as we looked at them together. I had not the heart to be disagreeable and to suggest that any should be plucked for vases, or to deck the altar bowls, and I saw that my old friend was relieved.

A little later I walked up the trim path empty-handed and peeped into the gooseberry and currant cages. The cages are made of fine wire netting, fixed on poles, about twenty feet square, in which were planted currants and gooseberries, to save their fruit from the wild birds. Burbidge joined me. "So," he said, "they has nothing inside to rob them, not a 'nope'" (as he calls the bullfinch), "nor them mischievous 'poke-puddings'" (by which name some folks here call the tomtits) "can interfere."

Hearing my favourites, the bullfinches, attacked, I could not help saying something in their defence. "The cock 'nope,' as you call him, is so beautiful," I urged, "that surely he may have a few buds in spring, and later on get a little fruit? Besides," I added warmly, "many people now say that he does no damage, and that the buds, that he attacks, are already diseased, and, anyway, would bear no fruit."

But at this Burbidge waxed wroth. "The nope," he retorted angrily, "be pure varmint for gardens, same as stoats be for poultry, and squirrels for trees; and as to his colour, 'tis like looks in lasses, it hath nought to do with character. I don't see things, marm, as you does. When yer sweats for a thing, there be no

halves in the matter. What's a friend to my garden, I be a lover to; but what's foreign, I be a foreigner to," and the old man walked away in a huff.

After "our bullfinch war," as Bess called it when I recounted to her later the little episode, I walked up the path that is edged by rows of double primroses. How lovely they were in the neatest of little clumps, white, yellow, and mauve, with here and there tufts of hen and chicken daisies, roots of the single blue primroses, brilliant polyanthuses, and the curious hose-in-hose variety, which an old South Country nurse of ours used to call "Jack-a-Greeners." A little further on, I saw some plants of the soft *Primula Cashmeriana*, which bore leaves which looked as if they had been powdered with milk of sulphur, and carried umbrella-like mauve heads of blossom.

A little higher up the path I saw some fine plants of *Primula Japonica* with its red whorls of blossom; and at the top of the garden I came across a line of beautiful auriculas. The most beautiful of all the primulas, I think, is "Les Oreilles d'Ours," as the French call these flowers, with their sweet distant smell, like downs covered with cowslips on dewy mornings, or golden apricots ripening on southern walls. As I passed back to the Abbey, I plucked a shoot off a black-currant bush. How fragrant the budding shoots were. They recalled the perfume of the bog myrtle on Scottish moors, only that the scent had something homely and useful, but none the less delicious.

Ten minutes later, and I was seated before my embroidery. To-day I had a blue dragon to work. I tried to see and to reproduce in my mind's eye Burne Jones' wonderful tints of blue with brown shades and silver lights, and so the hours passed.

In the afternoon Bess visited Thady. "Mama," she cried, "I think Thady will soon be well, for all he was so lame on Sunday. You see he wants to get well so badly, and what people want badly they generally get. I took him some pudding and some cake, and Nana gave him some ointment. Nana," said Bess, presently, "seems quite kind now. Do you know, mamsie, since Thady has taken her medicine, and rubbed on her lily stuff, she seems quite to like Thady."

"Ah, my little girl," I laughed, "you are discovering a very old truth. Nana has found a patient, and a patient always has virtues."

Bess did not quite understand, but declared it was a good job that Nana had given up disliking Thady, for in Thady, Bess found a most delightful and useful friend. He had already made my little maid a whistle, and was then engaged in making her a crossbow, and he is a wonderful hand in whittling an ash or hazel stick in elaborate designs, all of which are delightful and rare accomplishments in Bess's eyes.

All the week Bess ran up and down to the Red House. Bess repeated her verses for the *fête* to Miss Weldon, and gained what her governess called "word accuracy," but all gestures and action Constance taught her, I heard. Besides this, I was told about the dance which was being practised for the great day by eight little town maidens in the disused room over the stables of the Red House, and of the music which Constance's nice parlourmaid played. Constance endeavoured to get eight little boys to dance also; but the little lads were too shy, what an old woman, speaking of her grandson, calls "too daffish and keek-handed to learn such aunty-praunty anties," and all that Constance could get in the way of male support was to

induce eight little lads to look on, bend their knees, and bow at intervals, whilst the maidens sang and danced.

Bess was full of her verses and of her white costume, and old Nana, for all that she grumbled much at first, got stage-fever at last in her veins, and told me "that none would look as well as her blessed lamb, and seeing what the play was, and who made the dresses, and where the flowers grew, she held it to be all foolish, overgrown, mealy-mouthed righteousness on old Hester's part to stick out so obstinate and audacious again' a harmless bit of childer's play."

When I asked Burbidge if he and his men would get me some primroses and bunches of marsh marigolds, he was at first very wroth.

"Do yer take me for a loseller, marm?" he said, using the old country word for an idler. "Do yer think that I have nought to do, but to stump through wood and field, pulling blows for a May folly?"

But since the first outbreak he softened, and now he has begun to speak in a more kindly spirit, about fine primroses as grow above Homer steps, marsh marigolds as can be got near the Marsh Farm pool, and about cuckoo pint and bits of green fern, and I have little doubt that on May morning it will be found that my request has been granted.

Burbidge and Nana will always do what we want them, only give them time, as Bess says, for my little minx, young as she is, has long discovered that with old friends, and particularly old servants, there is often a great deal of bark, but happily not much bite.

One day it had been raining all the morning. Everything seemed growing. I could almost, as I looked out of the window, see the chestnut buds swelling, and the

points of the yews were turning a reddish gold. Through a window I could hear the canaries singing, singing and filling the garden with melodious sounds. The sun had gently pierced the clouds at last, and here and there faint shades of delicate blue were to be seen.

Suddenly, as I sat by the window plying my needle and admiring the rain drops glistening like crystals in the grass, I saw my little friend, Thady, below on the gravel walk. "What, Thady, you here!" I cried; for Thady, to use his mother's expression, was all himself again, bare-legged and as merry as a grig.

"Begorra, it's me," replied Thady, "me myself, and I've come to ask if yer will come a bird-nesting with me, some day?" And he added, with the courtesy that only can be found in an Irish imp, "'Twill be an honour and a pleasure to guide yer leddyship to the rarest nests in the country, and yer remember our talk some weeks ago?"

So, after a little parley, it was agreed that the following day, a Saturday, if fine, we would take our luncheon into the woods, and that Thady should climb the trees, as we had previously proposed.

We settled thus, the main point, for Thady, in his own language, "was the best man whatever at that sport." "Whilst you are climbing," I said, "we can look for rare flowers and ferns, and find what nests we can upon the ground."

I asked Thady a minute later what nests he knew of.

"Galore," he answered, grinning. And then proceeded to enumerate them: "A lintie (a linnet), a green grosbeak (greenfinch), a Harry redcap (goldfinch), a yellow yeorling by the roadside, a scobby (chaffinch), a lavrock (skylark), a cushie-doo (a wood pigeon), a cutty wren (common wren), a nanny washtail (pied wagtail)

in the rocks, and two tom-titers of sorts. Then there be hawks," he called through the window, "and one by Ippekin's Cave as I don't rightly know, bluish and bigger than the wind-hover (kestrel) or the pigeon-hawk, not to make mention of throstles and black ouzels (blackbirds), which just jostle same as hips and haws in October, but they're hardly worth the point of raising of a foot to see."

So our plans were made, and I looked forward to spending the morrow in the budding woods. Thady was to be our guide, but no eggs were to be taken. This was a matter of mortification to Thady. "Sure," he said, on another occasion, "I thought I would have made the little lady, this year, the prettiest necklace that ever was strung, fine and rare, for the May dance; and," he added, "yer leddyship must not forget that I have eaten of Miss Bess's blue egg, and so glad I would be to show her a bit of favour."

However, I succeeded in making Thady give up the project of robbing the nests, by begging him to make me a whistle, which, as my little daughter declares, is a thing that might be useful to everybody—"to a lady, to a bishop, or even to a Member of Parliament."

The next day was a day of glorious sunshine—gay and pure—one of those rare sweet days in spring, when it does not seem possible for "rain, or hail, or any evil thing to fall." Little Hals, to our joy, came over without governess or maid, only what Bess calls "under his own care," which she declared was best, because there was then no need to be naughty; and Miss Weldon, to the joy of all, vanished for the day to Shrewsbury; so, to quote my little girl, "all seemed happy, and everything just pure fun."

As the old church clock struck eleven we started.

The groom boy, Fred, led Jill, the Stretton pony, bearing a basket strapped on a saddle, which contained a simple luncheon, and off we went into the woods.

We started gaily; there were no trains to catch—always a subject of congratulation—and we only left word that we should be back for tea.

It was true that old Nana had black prognostications about what “that villain Thady would do” (for since Thady was cured, her kindly interest in him had ceased). But I laughed at her fears. “Nan,” I cried out as we left, “we will all take care of ourselves, and even Jill shall come back safe and sound.”

We walked along the town, Bess and Hals running in front, hand-in-hand, and Thady and I following leisurely behind. In a few minutes we had left the town behind us and were wandering up a lane, cut in the lime rock, bordered with yews in places, and between high hedgerows.

Hals begged that we might begin to bird-nest at at once; but Thady, who was master of the ceremonies, shook his head. “Best wait, begorra, for the Edge Wood, sir,” he exclaimed; “that’s the mightiest place in the county for all that wears feathers.”

So we marched on steadily to the great strip of wood which is known in Shropshire as the Edge Wood. This strip runs for many miles, is very precipitous in places, and consists of groves of oaks, patches of yews here and there, hollies—the haunts of woodcocks—and in many parts a rough tangle of hazel is to be found. It is a sweet wild place, little visited save by bird and beast. In one place the woodcutters had cut for some hundred yards, and in the cleared spaces the ground was covered with primroses, ground ivy, and the uncurled fronds of the lady fern—still brown and crinkly. Groups of lords and

ladies reared themselves up amongst their sombre leaves, and patches of dog's mercury nodded and whispered with their cords of green grain. Overhead, the larch in a few branches was breaking into emerald splendour, whilst pink tassels at the extremities trembled here and there. Squirrels leapt into the trees and vanished at our approach, and once or twice we heard, like a distant curse, the rancorous guttural cry of the jay, and saw one disappear into the undergrowth, a jewelled flash of turquoise splendour.

In a ride below, I saw a magpie hopping about, its long green-black tail bobbing up and down on the grass. At this sight Thady gravely took off his cap and saluted him, saying aloud—

“One for sorrow,
Two for mirth,
Three for a wedding,
Four for a birth.”

And then cried out in a tone of excitement, “Look out, yer leddyship, begorra, look out for another; for it is mirth to-day and no sorrow whatever that we must have.”

Then we plunged into the heart of the wood. Fred and Jill alone kept to the path. How lush it was, that soft moist turf in April, all teeming with moisture and freshness—not even the driest summer sun can parch or dry the soil of the Edge Wood. Here and there I saw little plantations of self-sown ash amidst beds of downy moss, and everywhere hundreds and thousands of little infinitesimal plants, struggling for existence. As I walked along I noted open glades, which later would be rosy with pink campion, or purple with the stately splendour of the foxglove. Now and then a bird flew

away, and I saw at intervals the white scut of a frightened rabbit.

Suddenly Thady stopped before a yew tree. Hals and Bess followed, panting and crying out eagerly, "Where, where?" for Thady had discarded his jacket, and in a twinkling had thrown his arms round the tree. In a second he was aloft. "A lintie's nest," he whispered, and then peered in. A minute later he called out, "Two eggs."

"Will you bring one down?" we said in chorus. For all answer, Thady nodded, slipped an egg into his mouth, and then proceeded to descend. We looked at the little egg that Thady held out on the palm of his hand. It was of a pale bluish white, speckled and streaked with lines of purplish brown.

After we had all peered over it, the egg was put back solemnly by Thady.

A little further on, and Thady again halted. "Here it be, yer leddyship," he cried, in a high treble; and there, sure enough, looking upward, we discerned a nest of twigs and roots. It was quite low down, and I was able easily to lift up the children to get a peep themselves. The little nest was lined with hair and wool stolen from the neighbouring fields, but as yet there were no eggs. "A nope's (bullfinch's) sure enough," said Thady, dogmatically. Then on we wandered until we paused below a fir tree. Below the bole of the tree there was no herbage, for the fir leaves had fallen like needles and had pierced and stabbed the grass to death—so it was quite bare now, not a leaf, or even a patch of moss; as bare, in fact, as a village playground.

Suddenly we heard overhead a loud, ringing clap of wings, and as we looked up, we saw an ill-made nest of sticks, and two eggs, which last we could see glistening

inside, like two button mushrooms. For a minute I had a vision of a big departing bird of a soft lavender grey, and as I looked, Thady called out, "Quice," which is the Shropshire name for the wood-pigeon. Thady was anxious to mount the tree and bring me down an egg for closer inspection; but I begged him not to do so, for the Cushat-Doos, as he tells me he has heard them called in the North Country, are very shy birds in a wild state, and I have been told will never return to a nest where the hand of man has trifled with eggs or nest.

I lingered, looking up at the shining round pink eggs with the light glimmering through the twigs; and then I mounted up the hill, which was very hard work, for both children were a little weary and hot, and I went up the incline, pulling both up as best I could. Mouse kept close to my heels. She had had dark suspicions ever since we entered the wood, and was convinced of the existence, I felt sure, of robbers, footpads, wolves, and also of innumerable vague dangers, and alarms.

We passed a blackbird's nest, but Thady waved his hand in lofty disdain, and refused to pull back the bough so that we might look at the eggs. "'Tisn't for dirt like that that I'll trouble yer leddyship and the young squire to spier round," he exclaimed. "The black ouzel is just a conny among feathered folk, or what blackberries be 'mongst the fruit."

Thady seemed to know every inch of the ground. "It isn't in woods or field that I forget myself," he remarked to me, when I commended him for his knowledge of the Edge. "Devil a bit," he said, "if I have ever lost my way along, or missed a mark or forgotten the bend of a stick; but," he added, in a tone of contrition, "'tis in the book larning and figures that Thady Malone cannot always discern rightly."

At last, after much puffing and panting, we reached the top of the hill.

"Like enough we'll find a scobby's nest in the hedge," said Thady. Then he went on to say, "They be wonderful builders be scobbys; 'tight and nanty,' as folks say here." And sure enough, a little further on, fixed in a branch of blackthorn, we saw a little nest of exquisite beauty. Outside it appeared to be built almost entirely of lichen, pulled off the bark of trees; whilst inside it was lined with hair and feathers, woven together with marvellous dexterity. There were three eggs, all of a reddish pale grey, blotched here and there with vinous patches.

As we stood watching the nest, the handsome little cock chaffinch eyed us anxiously. With a quick movement he turned round, and we caught the flash of his white wings. "A bobsome, joyous little gent," said Thady; "a scobby, I have heard folks say, is the last bird to give over singing in summer."

Then we sat down to luncheon. "We must eat," Bess cried with conviction; "seeing so many nests has made me feel eggy with hunger." All round us the birds filled the thicket with the joy of their carols. "The place fair swarms with them," observed Thady, "but come a week or two, we shall have all the foreigners over." By which he, doubtless, meant the arrival of all the delicious warblers that come from the South in spring, not to mention many of the cock chaffinches, most of the pipits, the yellow water-wagtails, the gorgeous redstarts, and the beautiful turtle, or Wrekin doves.

Listening to the different notes, we sat down and got our luncheon, which Bess and Hal, who had acquired the appetite of hunters, declared was fit for

any king, and believed that even Nan, if she had been there, wouldn't grumble.

"When I'm at home," said Bess, after a pause, "I eat mutton, but here I call it the flesh of sheep," and as she spoke she put upon Hal's knees another slice. Hal looked at her and retorted gravely, "Mutton isn't good, but the flesh of sheep is fit for a general."

Thady, overhearing these remarks, exclaimed, "Begorra, it is a poor place where Thady Malone cannot eat to your leddyship's health." And added, "Deed, I'm like Mrs. Langdale's chickens, I could peck a bit wherever it was." So saying, he fell heartily to work on some huge beef sandwiches which had been prepared for him and Fred, by Auguste. A few minutes later, the girths of the saddle were loosened and Jill was allowed to graze at her own free will, nipping and cropping the tender grass with avidity.

"Mamsie," said Bess, after the last scrap of chocolate had been eaten, and the last Blenheim orange apple munched, "have you no fairy-story to tell us, for you know, this is a real place for fairy-tales." Then the children crept under my cloak, and I rambled on aloud about princes and princesses, giants and dragons, enchanted castles, good and evil fairies, and knights and ladies.

Thady approached our group and listened also. "'Tis better nor a theatre," he was kind enough to say, as I came to an end at last, with the happy marriage of the prince and princess, and a description of the royal festivities on that occasion. "Begorra," he exclaimed, "I'd like to be a man, and fight dragons and giants. Fightin' is the life for me."

Then we got up, packed the basket, and prepared to return homeward across the fields. Jill was caught,



NEST OF GREENFINCH.



NEST OF RING-OUZEL.

Photos by Mrs. New.

but could with difficulty be girthed, so enlarged had she become by several hours of happy browsing; but after a struggle the saddle and basket are put on, and we turned our heads homewards. Hals had been silent for the last few moments.

"Well," I said, "what is it?"

"I too should like to fight," he answered, "but it must be on a horse and in armour."

"'Tis all one, sir," replied Thady, cheerily, "so long as yer get a stomach full of blows and can give good knocks back. Fighting," he explained, "is what makes the difference between boys and girls, and it is the glory of auld Oireland."

We talked away and walked homeward. There was a nest of a cutty wren in a juniper bush, which Thady knew of, and a tomtit's in a hollow tree, beautifully made of a mass of feathers, and in it were many tiny eggs, almost too small to touch without breaking, and Fred lifted both children up to see. A little further on, Thady pointed away to a distant orchard that encircled two lonely cottages nestling against the opposite hill. "There," he said, "be the nest of a Harry red-cap." But our energy had died away for bird-nesting. "It shall be for another day," said Bess. And then added dreamily, "I didn't think I ever could have seen bird-nests enough, but I think some other play now would be nice."

So we walked on, Hals leading the way, and Thady bringing up the rear and whistling, as he went along, the Shan Van Vocht. Thus we returned home, Bess and Hals riding on Jill in turns. The cry of the cuckoo pursued us like a voice out of dreamland, while the scents of the sweet spring day were wafted to us on a hundred eddying breezes.

In the evening I found a note from Constance at the Abbey. She sent me a full list of the flowers she proposed working on the quilts, and added, "What do you think of these words about sleep?—

" 'Sweet sleep fell upon his eyelids.'—*The Odyssey*.

" 'Sleep and death.'—*The Iliad*.

" 'Death and his brother sleep.'—SHELLEY.

" 'Sleep thy fill, and take thy soft repose.'—QUARLES.

" 'Sleep in peace and wake in joy.'—SCOTT, *Lord of the Isles*.

" 'Never sleep the sun up.

Rise to prevent the sun.'—VAUGHAN."

When I had written to Constance, I thought of bed in a happy sleepy state of mind. As I brushed out my hair, I went over our pleasant long day in the woods, away from men, and noise, and even home. A day spent amidst birds and beasts, looking at nests, resting on mossy banks, and seeing only the sweet, sprouting things of field and lane, is a delightful thing.

Is there anything better than a day out in the heart of the country? As I slipped into bed, Bess's last words came back to me as she went off to her cot. "Is it really very wicked, mamsie, to take nests and eggs?—for Fred says he has done it scores and scores of times, and he doesn't see no use in such things if they can't make sport for young ladies and gentlemen."

"Some day you will understand," I had replied. "One cannot know some things when one is very young." And I have often noticed with children, that, up to a certain age, the uneducated view of everything is the sympathetic and natural one; later, to a few, the light does come.

CHAPTER V

MAY

"Come lasses and lads, take leave of your dads,
And away to the May-pole hie ;
For every he has got him a she,
And a minstrel standing by.
For Willy has gotten his Jill,
And Johnny has got his Joan
To jig, to jig it, jig it up and down."

Old May Song.

ALL the morning Bess had been beside herself, jumping up and down, and running round in gusts of wild excitement. At noon the *fête* was really to take place, and at that hour Constance and her band were to come down by a back way through the town. The piano had already been moved on the bowling green, between the yew hedges. In the distance I had watched Burbidge superintending, and I am sure grumbling freely by the ominous shakes of his head. Our old servant had been in a great state of alarm about his lawns since the dawn, and the passing of the piano under the great yew arch had been to him a matter of grave anxiety "They be centuries in growing, be yews," he said to me, "and the commonest piano as is made, can break 'em."

However, in spite of his hostile tone, Burbidge and

"his boys" went out quite early and brought back an abundance of fiery marsh marigolds from the marshes, great sprays of budding beech, and a few branches of opening hawthorn; besides which they gathered bunches of primroses, the last of the season that were still in flower in damp woodlands and against northern banks, and also purple heads of meadow orchises. "She'll be fine," Burbidge told Nan, "but it be a sad waste of time pulling wild things that come up all by themselves, when we might have been puttin' faters in or wheelin' on manure." At this old Nan had waxed wroth and had exclaimed, "There's none too old to idle sometimes, Burbidge." "Ay," had replied our old gardener in a surly tone, "but let me idle in my own way."

However, for all his apparent hostility, I had an idea at the back of my head, that Burbidge would be concerned if the little *fête* did not go off well; and I believed, in spite of his angry tones, that he and his boys would deck the May-stang and order all rightly for me.

I was not deceived, for as I looked out of the drawing-room windows, I saw a little later the gardeners all at work, putting up the May-pole. In a little while it was finely decked with gay flowers, and Célestine and Nana, for once united in a common cause, brought out many yards of coloured ribbon, which they tied in knots of pink, red, white, blue, and yellow amongst the flowers. These floated like a hundred little flags in the breeze, and seemed to fill the air with gaiety.

When this operation was at last completed, the dressing of Bess began in earnest, and my little maid for once sat quite still, and allowed mademoiselle to brush and fluff her hair till it stood out like the mane of a Shetland pony. This done, Nana put her on a little

white bodice and paniers, and sewed on bunches of primroses and white violets, and then crowned her with a crown of golden marsh marigolds that the deft fingers of Célestine had twisted together. "Thee'll be crowned, dear," said the old nurse softly, "with the lucky flower." Then all the maids from upstairs and downstairs crowded to the nursery, and Bess received me graciously, looking like a little fairy. In her hand she held her sceptre as May Queen, round which was wound a sprig of ivy, and one little bunch of violets.

All the time my little girl had been dressing, her lips had never ceased to move. I asked her what was the matter? "My verses, my verses," was her reply. When all was completed, and the bunches re-sewn in places so that none could fall, Nana looked out of a passage window. "They be all a-comin' to see my lamb," she cried. And sure enough there were old men in smocks, old beldames in quaint old black sun-bonnets, and all the children from the National School. On they streamed together. Then Constance and her dancers appeared, some of them running to escape observation, and all attired in waterproofs, so that nobody might see the splendour of their festive apparel. The garlands on their heads even were covered with Shetland shawls. They had slipped down by the churchyard and so into the ground, to try and gain unseen the back of the great yew hedge and walnut tree.

"We are all ready," cried Constance, as we made our way out and gained her group. I looked at her band of children. "Some will be dancers," she said, "in yellow and green, some in blue, and the rest in cherry or scarlet. Behind her little lasses stood eight little lads in smocks, with soft felt hats, looped up with ribbons, and each gay bachelor had a posy knot, like the bouquets

coachmen used to wear at a drawing-room in Queen Victoria's time.

"They will dance," whispered Constance to me in an aside, and pointed to her little swains, "another year, and then the little girls will not have all the fun to themselves."

Then there was a hush, and the Shetland shawls and the cloaks were all taken off in a jiffey, and at a signal given, Dinah started playing on the piano. The old tune across the lawn sounded like a far-off tinkle. Dinah made a pretty picture. She was dressed like a village maiden of the eighteenth century. On her head she had a mob-cap, across her shoulders was folded a fichu of lawn, and on her hands were a pair of old black silk mittens that belonged long years ago to Constance's grandmother.

All the people stood aside as the players and dancers made their way to the centre of the lawn.

Then the singers stood by the piano and started in unison an old May song. The sun shone forth brightly, and a throstle joined in from a damson tree at the top of his voice.

There was a general sense of joy. The young voices sounded sweet and clear, and all the meadows and distant hills seemed bathed in a blue mist.

At last the singing died away. Then Bess, with bright eyes, but somewhat nervous steps, advanced and repeated her verses. She spoke as clearly as she could. Nana looked at her, as if she could eat her up with pride, and afterwards declared that Bess had spoken like an archbishop; and even old Sally Simons, who is believed to be deafer than any post on the estate, affirmed that she could hear "'most every word."

Across the budding sward Milton's beautiful verses in praise of May seemed to ring in my ears. In the far

meadows, the rooks were cawing amongst the poplars, and over the Abbey pool a few swallows were skimming and catching flies—

"Hail! bounteous May that dost inspire
Mirth and youth and warm desire."

The world seemed young again—old age a myth, and nature exceedingly fair. At last Bess's lines were ended, and my little maid made her curtesy and tripped back to me. Then the dancers stepped forward and the music broke out afresh into a merry jingle. They stood round the May-pole, advanced solemnly and made profound reverences. A few seconds later, the tinkling of the piano grew quicker and quicker, for the eight little maidens had all caught hold of each other's hands, and round and round they went as fast as youth and gaiety could take them. The people clapped, and the old folks broke forth into shrill laughter. Old Timothy beat the gravel with his stick, till Burbidge glared at him and muttered something disagreeable about "folks not being able to behave themselves;" whereupon my old guest hung his head and began to cough asthmatically.

The dance pleased all so well, that Constance and her little *corps dramatique* were obliged to go through the whole of it again. "It be better nor a ballet" said old Timothy. "I seed one once years ago at Shrewsbury Theatre, after the Crimean war; but this here be dancing on the green—and not dancing for money, but for pure joy." So away the little dancers footed it again. Even the little lads, who hitherto had remained stolid and apparently indifferent, caught something of the enthusiasm of the spectators, for at intervals they bowed with eagerness, and pointed and laughed at the little maidens, and ejaculated aloud,

as they had been taught by Constance to do at the rehearsals, "Good, good, well done, Mistress Betty; excellently, madam," and so on, till, as a fond mother said, "Anybody might think as they had been born play-actors, for they took to mumming same as widdies (young ducks) do to water."

When all was over, and even the tinkling piano was heard no more, Fremantle and footmen bearing trays of cake, beer, and milk appeared on the scene. As to the children, we made them stand in long lines on the paths, and gave them slices of cake and buns, and drinks of milk in the blue and white mugs of the country; but before they fell to, they repeated in chorus the old grace which Constance had found in praise of May merry-making. At last, not even the youngest little boy could eat any more, and gradually all my guests bowed and curtsied, and left the lawn, but old Timothy who was seized with a violent fit of coughing, leant feebly on his stick, and looked at me piteously out of his rheumy eyes.

"'Tis the rheumatics as has got hold of me," he said, between two fits of coughing. "They be terrible companions, be rheumatics, worse than snakes nor wasps, and allus with 'un summer and winter. Rheumatics," he added wheezily, "be like burrs, they hangs on to yer all seasons."

"Come in for a bit," I said, "and rest by the fire." Young blood is warm, but the sun hasn't much warmth yet. So I led old Timothy into the housekeeper's room, whilst kind Auguste made him on the gas stove a "bon bouillon" and prepared for him a glass of spiced beer.

"I can't say, marm, why I took on like that," said old Timothy, humbly. "It cumed like all of a sudden, and I shook like a leaf, and a kind of a swim-swammy

sense mastered me, and dwang-swang, I think I should have found myself on the turf, if you hadn't taken me in and comforted me."

As the old man spoke, I saw that some colour was coming back into his old cheeks. He felt cheered by his drop of broth, and when he had sipped of the warm ale his tongue began to wag.

"To-day," he said, "put me to mind of the old days when the world ran merrily at Wenlock, and for the matter of that, all through the countryside. They had holidays, they had, afore they had invented trains, trams, and motors. There war the Wakes proper, and the Wisheng Wells—all sports and jollity after good work."

Then old Timothy proceeded to tell me how, in the old times, "they used to clap up booths and have shows, and dances. My grandam used to tell how they had in her time Morris dancers and play-acting, and I remember," he continued, "a rare bit of fun. 'Twas to grin through a horse-collar at Church Stretton. When I war a lad," said old Timothy, "'twas accounted a fine thing to be able to make the horriblest face in the town—next best to being the sweetest scraper on a fiddle or a fine singer in a catch. I was never much of a musician," pursued my old guest, regretfully, "but for downright, hugeous horror put into a human face, I war bad to beat."

Then, after a pause, he went on to say, "I mind me there war St. Milburgha's Wake at Stoke. There used to be pretty sports there. The lads used to come in smocks and dance. They used to foot it sharp to old country dances, cheery with lot of jumping, skipping, and bobbing. Men used to say 'twas in honour of St. Milburgha. I don't hold to saints, as a rule," explained

Timothy; "they be mostly old bones, nails, and useless rubbish; but I draws a difference between Shropshire and the rest, and I believes in Shropshire saints proper, same as in my own parish church and in grandam's grave."

After a few minutes, the old man went on to tell me about the Well Wakes. "Folks used to flock to 'em," he said. "They used to meet and have a jolly time. There war the Beach Wake, near against Chirbury. There they went in great numbers, and the best class of farmers and their wives. There war a Whirl-stone then, but on Wake Sunday it turned all by itself, Old Jackson as sold the best ale allus used to say.

"Then when us could, us went to the Raven's Bowl and to the Cuckoo's Cup on the Wrekin at the proper times. God Almighty, we war taught to believe, kept they full of water for his birds, and 'twar there that we Shropshire lads, seventy years ago and more, used to go and wish, when we had a mind to wed a wench—seventy years ago," the old man lingered over the words, repeating them softly. "One summer mornin' I got up," he continued, "when the dew was lying like jewels on the turf and wet the grass it war so that yer could wring it out with a cloth. I war up betimes, and I walked, and walked till I got to the spot. There warn't many places in Shropshire as I didn't know then," Timothy exclaimed with pride; and added with enthusiasm, "yer gets to know the betwixts and between of everything, sure enough, when yer be earth-stopper to the hunt. Dad warn't by trade, but Uncle Mapp war—Peregine Mapp, as us used to call un—as lived behind Muckley Cross and war the best ount-catcher as ever I knowed, rat-catcher, and stoat-trapper, and death to varmint generally. Well, he

took me on from rook scarin' for Farmer Burnell; I lived with he till I war twelve. They talks now of eddication, but 'tis the eddication of wood and hill as be the right 'un to make a man of yer."

"Yes, Timothy," I said; and to bring him back to his first subject, I added, "but you were telling me about your walk to the Wrekin, and how you drank from the Raven's and Cuckoo's bowls there."

"Ay, ay, sure I was," replied the old man, and a gleam of light shot into his lustreless eyes. So saying he rubbed his hands softly before the blazing logs and went on—

"Well, it war the longest day of the year. That night in June, I've heard say, when they used to light fires on the hill tops, and when the men used to sing, and some of 'em used to leap through the fires and call it Johnnie's Watch; but the squires, when they took to planting on the hillsides, forbid that sport, and there war somethin' to be said on that score, for I believe myself it frightened foxes.

"Well, sure enough I walked, as I said, to the Wrekin over the Severn by Buildwas Bridge, and up beyond near Little Wenlock and through Wenlock Wood. I war desperate sweet on Susie Langford—I hadn't hardly opened my mouth to her, but the sight of her remained with me, night and day, same as the form of a good horse does to a young man who can't afford to buy him—and I stood on the heights of the great hill, and I drank out of the bowls and wished and wished, and made sure as I should get my heart's desire, for grandam had allus said, 'Him as goes to the Wrekin on midsummer morning, gains his wish as sure as a throstle catches a worm on May morning.' Them, her used to say, 'as goes to the Wrekin on the May Wakes, gets nought but a jug of

ale and a cake.' Well, I think I got nought but water, and never a cake that mornin', for little the wish or the bowls did for me."

"Did you mind very much?" I asked, watching the shadow that swept over his face.

"Did I mind?" replied old Timothy, vehemently. "Some three months arter, when they told me that Susie war agoin to marry the miller in the Dingle, I laid me down on the cold ground in the old Abbey Church, and thought I should have died of the pure howgy misery of the whole job. Grandam she gave me all she could to comfort me. I got thin as a lath—she gave me candoughs and flap-jacks and begged apples to slip into dumplins, off the neighbours; and her brewed me a drop of beer from the water from the church roof. But it warn't nothing to me, yer can't comfort a man by his stomach, when he be in love.

"Anton Ames war a hugeous fellow and one of the best with fist or gloves, or I'd have killed 'un," broke out old Timothy, "for he seemed to poison the whole countryside for me."

"But you got over her loss at last," I ventured to say, "though you have never married."

"One do," replied the old man grimly. "There be a time for everything—for women, for posy knots, dancing, and all the kickshaws. They be all toys, mere toys. 'Tis only sport and beer as lasts." As he spoke the old man looked gloomily into the fire and warmed his wrinkled hands afresh.

"And Susie?" I could not refrain from asking; "what happened to her?"

"Her married and reared a pack of childer," answered Timothy, "and when Anton fell off his cart one dark night from Shrewsbury Market, they said her

cried, but cried fit to wash away her eyes. But her got comforted in time—they mostly do, does women; and then, after a bit, her took a chapman. They often do, for number two I've noticed," continued Timothy, meditatively; "for chapmans have ready tongues, and be oily and cheeky in one. And Sue her had a bit of siller, and they married sharp off, at Munslow Church, I heard, and Sue her used to go hawking with Gipsy Trevors, as they called 'im, and they used to pass through Bridgenorth, Stretton, and up by Ludlow, same as if her had never been born respectable or had rubbed bright an oak dresser, or swept a parlour carpet."

"What did you do at the Wakes, and how long did they last?" I asked as old Timothy relapsed into silence.

"Oh, they was most part a week," answered the old man. "There war too much fun then in folks, to let the fun die out so quick as it does now. Now, if a squire has a cricket-match, 'tis all over in no time. Piff-paff like a train through a tunnel. There's nought now but a smack, and a taste of jollity, and it dies with daylight. When I was a boy, it was altogether different. Us could work, and us could play, and us liked to take our fill, same as young bullocks on spring grass. Us used to dance and sing, run races, and jump for neckties and hat-bands, and play kiss-in-the-ring, and manage," said old Timothy, with a twinkle in his eye, "to stand by a pretty lass then, and to wrestle and box besides. They war merry times." And here his voice sank almost to a whisper, "And then there was cock-fightin'."

"Cock-fightin'?" I enquired. "Have you ever seen much of that?"

"Lord love yer!" retorted Master Theobalds, with kindly contempt. "Of course I have, and a prettier,

more gentlemanly sport I b'aint acquainted with. I mind me of the good old time, when every squire had his own main of cocks, and many war the farmers as had a good clutch, and great war the pride of the missus in rearin' a good 'un round the Clee, and over at Bridgenorth. Folks used to say at Ludlow, as there were some as thought more of their cocks, than of their own souls. Why, marm, when I war a little un, we should have thought a town a poor benighted one-horse place as hadn't got its cock-pit. There used," continued old Timothy, "to be a fine place beyond what is now the vicarage, where they used to fight 'em regularly on Easter Monday, and at the May Fair at Much Wenlock. Every serving-man as had a touch of sport in his blood used to get leave to go 'cocking,' as they called it then, and a right merry sport it war, sittin' fine days on the spring grass, and seeing two game uns go tooth and nail for each other."

"Did they put spurs on them?" I asked the old man.

"Of course they did, and weighed 'em." And then old Timothy added, "Scores of times I've put on the spurs myself to oblige a squire, or a kindly farmer as had given me a jog back from the meet, or a lift on, when I war searchin' after a terrier."

"Was there not a belief that a cock hatched in an owl or magpie's nest was sure to have luck in the ring?" I asked.

"Sure there war," answered Timothy, with conviction. "I remember hearin' of one, Owen by the Clee, as had a cock that he allus swore had been reared by an owl; and Davies, near Munslow, had a famous green-tailed bird, that he used to say was hatched in a pie's nest. I cannot say for sure how it war," said the old

man, "but sartain I be that them war the two best birds as ever I seed—let 'em be reared as they might be. They war two upstanding birds, tall in the leg, long, lean heads, and born game. No white feather in they. There war many," continued the old man, "who tried to get luck in all ways, and stopped at nothing. Some gave 'em chopped beef afore fightin', and many beat up an egg in their meal to give 'em courage and strength. And then"—and here old Timothy paused—"there war other ways."

"What ways?" I asked with curiosity.

"Well," and my old guest sank his voice to a whisper, "there war some on Easter Sunday as took the Sacrament, as took it at no other time."

"But what had that to do with cock-fighting?" I asked.

"Why, jist this," and Timothy's voice became hardly audible. "They drank the wine, but saved the bread, for some believed that a cock that had eaten consecrated bread afore he went into the ring, war bound to win, as the devil fought for 'im himself."

"What a horrible sacrilege!" I could not refrain from exclaiming.

"That's what folks wud say now," agreed Timothy, complacently; "but there war many as didn't feel that then. Times be different. It war wrong, I suppose," he added, "but the sport war that strong in Shropshire men then, they wud ha' raced angels for pence and fought with Bibles, if so be folks would have laid on bets."

But after a pause, he added, "They didn't all go that far; some only bought dust from church chancels that they threw on their bird's feathers, or chucked a pinch into the bags, and there never came no harm

from that, for it gave the sextons and vergers a lucky penny, and made use of what otherwise would have been let lie on the midgeon heap. And even parsons didn't themselves interfere there, 'cause the practice made sextons and church officials easy to find as nuts in the Edge Wood."

Then I turned, and asked the old man about old Squire Forester's hounds.

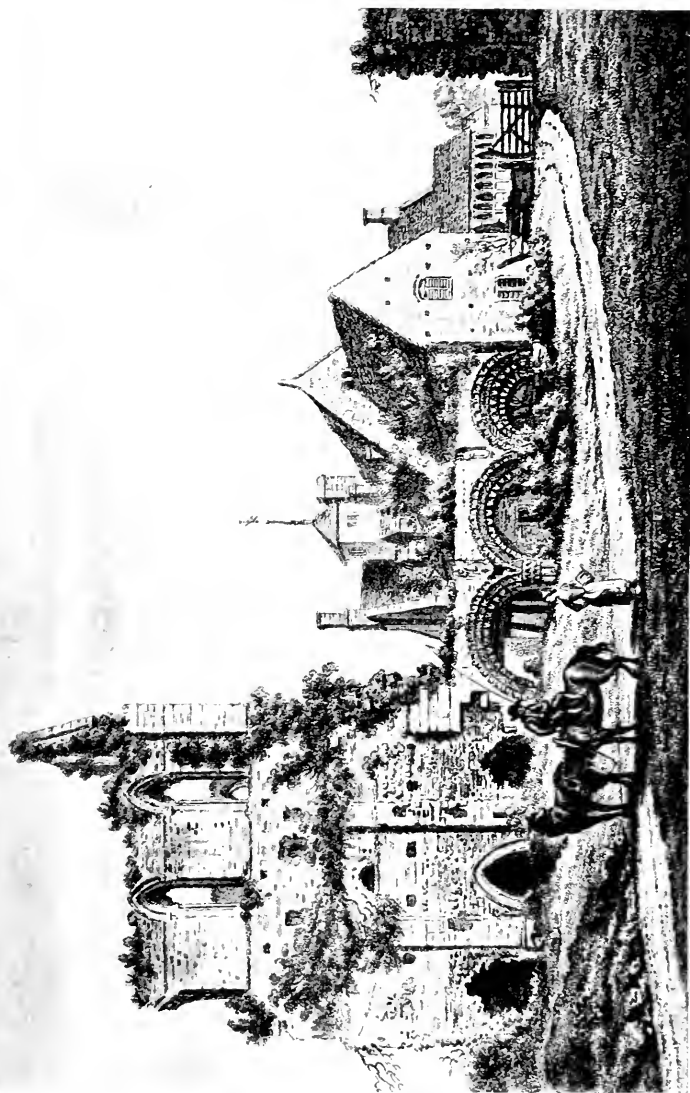
"Ay, they war grand ones." And my old guest's eyes flashed with enthusiasm. And then old Timothy went on to ask me if I had ever heard of Tom Moody, "as great a devil as ever rode a horse. There war none to beat Tom—Tom war whipper-in, and then huntsman, and bred a rider. One day he rode, as a little lad, an ugly cob with a pig-bristled mane. Somehow Tom hung on, jumped with the best, and never fell, though the leps that day, they said, were hugeous. I never seed Tom myself," continued Timothy, "but grandam war his own cousin right enough, and it war a proud moment for any lad to clasp hands with old Tom. There war many then less proud to know a bishop or a peer, than to know Tom.

"The old squire, when he seed the lad ride like that, said at the finish—

"'Will you come back and whip in for me, for yer be the right sort?'

"'Will I, yer honour? Sure I will,' said Tom, and his ugly mug broke out like May blows in sunshine, a friend standing by told us. Tom and the squire they never parted till Tom war buried under the sod of Barrow churchyard.

"Up and down dale, war Moody's way. Nothing lived before him. He never stopped for hedge or ditch. Often 'tis told of 'im that he used to take guests of the



RUINS OF WENLOCK ABBEY IN 1778.

From an Engraving after a Drawing by Paul Sandby, R.A.



squire's back to Shifnal, where they met the coach for London. Then Tom would drive his prime favourite in the yellow gig. He counted his neck for nothing, and didn't set no store on theirs, and they did say he would lep pikes and hedges same as if he war hunting, and never injured tongue of buckle or stitch of a strap."

"Was that possible?" I exclaimed in amazement.

"Lor bless yer, mam, everythin' war possible with Tom. They said here he war a devil incarnate on a horse, or in his shay, and nothing could stop him. Folks said he loved his old horse better than his soul."

"What was the name of his horse?"

"'Old Soul,' right enough," answered Timothy; "a great lean beaste, sixteen hands and more. Any amount of bone and not a square inch of flesh, with a docked tail and a wicked wall eye. He kicked and bit, did Old Soul, as if he war the great Satan himself; and I've heard 'em say at the kennels, that there war none but Tom and one other man about the place as dared go near him to dress him down, for he would savage any one when he had a mind. Heels up, and ears back, and his eye the colour of a yule log at Christmastide, those were his ways. Yet Tom at covert side thought mountains of him. 'Old Soul and I must get to heaven together,' he used to say, 'for what the old chap wud do without me, or I without he, 'twould puzzle me to think. And 'tis the wickedest, cutest old devil that ever man sat across,' Tom used to swear, 'but if a man's got a spice of the true hunter in him, he blesses God to be on such a horse when hounds be running, devil or no devil.'

"Once," continued Timothy, "I heard as Tom war lost. They hunted for 'un everywhere down beyond Kenley, where they had been in the morning. In those

days the country there war very marshy in the winter time, for there wasn't a bit of draining. Well, I've heard it said as Tom went in, and it happened in this way. Tom war leading his horse, but the horse war wiser than Tom, for feelin' the ground shaky, he jerked up his head sudden like, and snapped the bridle and got away. Tom, he tried to leap out of the bog, but he couldn't, for sure he war sucked in and kept fast prisoner in the clay.

"When the squire and the pack got back to the kennels there war no Tom. 'Hullo! where be Tom?' cried the squire, and he got anxious, for never in the born days of man had Tom not turned up. They called and they sent out riders, and they shouted like scholards out on a holiday, but nothin' of Tom could they hear. So out the squire and the faithful hunt they set, with a fresh pack, and fresh horses, and only a lick down of somethin' to keep the soul in 'em. On they went, the squire leadin' like a lord on his white-legged chestnut. Only this time it warn't no fox-hunting, but a man as they war searchin' after.

"On they rode across Blakeway, beyond Harley, then turning straight westwards they got to the wild country, and they rode round, I've heard say, almost to Church Stretton, up to the foot of the Caradoc; and sure enough, just as the squire war about to give up the job and creep home to get a bit of supper, and get dogs and men to their beds, they heard, as I'm a Christian man, somethin' a-croaking and calling 'Tally-ho! tally-ho!' but so hoarse, and strange, and misty-like, that it seemed no real voice, but whispers from a ghost.

"One of the whipper-ins, a small white-haired little chap as they used to call 'Soap,' because he looked so clean and peart, and was a pet-like with the lasses, began

to shiver and call out 'Lord 'a mercy, let's hunt the fox, but leave alone devils and Herne the Hunter, and such like.' But the squire, he never turned a hair, and he called out, 'No bed, or rest for me till we've found Tom,' and he rode on on his chestnut; and then Jack Pendrell, what was a groom, he called out too, 'Where the squire goes, I go,' and he set spurs into his grey; and then they followed on, hounds and men, like a covey of partridges. And all of a sudden, I have heard 'em say (for it war the talk of the country-side for many days), Old Dancer gave a whimper and then Regent followed suit, and then Butterfly and Skylark threw in their bell notes, and away the whole hunt burst like steam. They barely seemed to touch the ground, but ran like mad, as hounds do in a killing scent. The squire fairly split the chestnut, Tom Trig and Bob Buckson followed close behind, and they rode as if the devil was at their heels. And all the while the voice kept calling, hulloing like a spirit in a tomb, only fainter and fainter—a kind of unearthly screech like a raven dooming a Christian across a churchyard. At last two hounds ran in, and the squire leapt from his horse, which steamed like a chimney, and there they found Tom sucked up in the ground fit to die, and the wind pretty nearly out of his body. He looked like a ghost when they got him out. He must have perished long before, he told 'em, if it hadn't been that he had found a stout handful of grass by which he had hung on, and called for his life.

"Well, the long and the short of it was, when they hauled him out—which they did by ropes and knotting their handkerchiefs together—they put him on an old dun pony. But Tom war that silly and faint, that they had to tie him on to keep him from falling, and so they got him home.

"When they got back to Willey, the squire had him taken straight to his own bed, and clapt inside. 'Tom,' he said, 'don't yer die; yer drink and yer bain't worth much, but fox-hunting in Shropshire can't live without yer.' And," continued old Timothy, "Tom declared then he felt fit to die of glory at the thought as he, Tom, and fox-hunting war one and the same thin' in Shropshire. Well, Tom got round, for all his chill and lying in the ground six mortal hours, but he never war the same man again. The squire spared no expense on him, and made him take the same medicines as he took himself, and gave him foreign wines, though they do say as Tom would have liked old ale better."

"When did old Tom die at last?" I asked.

"I cannot precisely remember, but I've heard it war in 1796 or thereabouts. He war no great age, but he had lived fast and went to bed mellow, as fellows used to do then. Well, ma'am, when the doctor gave up hope, it wasn't long as Tom was ill, for once out of the saddle he hadn't much to live for, as I've heard 'em say. The days seemed mortal long to Tom, lyin', as he said, mute as a log and nothing to interest 'im but the goin' out and the comin' home of the hounds. When Tom had made up his mind that he warn't long for this world, he begged the squire to step down.

"'Squire,' he said, 'I've been a sinner, and God forgive me; not of much good to nobody save on a horse, but I've hunted to please you and to please myself.' And they say that the old squire, when he heard Tom talk like that, spoke very gentle and pitiful, and he said, taking Tom's hand, 'Tom, my man, yer don't owe me nothin'. You've been a right good servant, gone like the devil, and loved the hounds like yer brothers.'

“‘Right, squire, right,’ answered Tom. And then he told him what war in his mind about his berrial.

“There’s some as like it one way and some another,” said old Timothy, “but Tom he’d set his mind on a hunting funeral. The hounds war to be in at the death, as he called it, and the good men who rode hard and straight war to be there too, and give a view holloa after parson had said the prayers. Would parson mind? Tom had asked. But the squire told ’im not to vex hisself, for the parson war of the right sort, and would understand that fox-hunting and the Church war both the glory of Englishmen. Then he asked, did Tom, that his favourite old horse, him as he had called Old Soul, was to follow behind ready saddled as for a day’s hunting. And then, when all was settled to Tom’s mind, he and the squire shook hands and said good-bye to each other. The squire,” continued my old guest, “war a right proper man, masterful but kind, knew his own mind, but war faithful to them as had been faithful to him, and what he promised Squire George allus did. He was iron as to promises—said little, but stuck to a promise as if it had been the last word of his mother, folks said. So in November, a matter of a few days after poor Tom had died, they buried him accordin’ to his instructions, and all the good fellows that had followed the hunt, and seen him show them rattling sport fine days and foul days alike, came from far and near to do him honour. And when they shouted, after lowering Tom’s coffin, there war no irreverence in the job whatever. People now,” continued Timothy, “don’t understand sport. They think ’tis only fit stuff for a daily paper, and mayn’t come nohow to church or touch Church goings on. Oh, but Lord love yer!”—and my old friend drew himself up straight in his chair—“they

thought different then, and they gave Tom a view holloa, for all they were worth, did the hunt, and stood there reverent and pious over his grave bareheaded alongside, till the woods and hills fair rang with their voices. No harm," said my old friend, "war meant, and no harm war done, for God Almighty wouldn't make foxes if he didn't hold to fox-chasing." As he spoke, Master Theobalds got up. "Good-bye, marm, and thank you kindly," he said. "It does me good to talk of the old days and of the old goin's on. It kind of brings back a bit of sun to me."

As he spoke the old man rapped his stick feebly along the old cement floor of the monks and crept out of the door. My big dog looked after him and growled, for the tapping of a stick is a thing that few dogs can stand.

What strong men for good or ill, I argued, they were, those men who saw the end of the eighteenth and the birth of the nineteenth century. How brave and undaunted! They fought England's quarrels over Europe, and they died in Spain, and won on the plains of Waterloo. How narrow they were, how intolerant, and how brave! Surely fox-hunting taught them some of their endurance and courage, and the long days over woodland and moor gave them strong muscles and brave hearts, and prepared them for the hardships of war.

The morning, with its glory of sunshine had passed, and the afternoon had grown grey and still. The joy of the morning seemed hushed, a chill grey sky was overhead, and the lowering clouds promised, a wet night.

I wandered out and walked amongst the ruins. Outside the grounds I heard a dog faintly barking, and the faint murmur of children's voices reached me, but as in

a dream ; all the laughter and the gaiety of May morning had fled. I noticed that the thorns were bursting into blossom, and that a white lilac was covered with snow-like flowers.

I passed into the Chapter House. Alas ! in the nineteenth century one complete set of arches had fallen, but the beautiful interlaced arches were still there, although every saint had been knocked off his niche and destroyed by the hooligan of Henry VIII.'s or Elizabeth's reign. On the northern side, says tradition, reposed the body of St. Milburgha.

I felt in the grey evening as if I was standing on holy ground. It was here, according to William of Malmesbury, the historian monk, "that there lived formerly a very ancient house of nuns. The place (Wenlock)," he tells us, "was wholly deserted on account of the Danes having destroyed the fabric of the nunnery. After the Norman conquest, Roger de Montgomery filled the monastery with Clugniac monks, where now," wrote the pious monk, "the fair branches of virtue strain up to heaven. The virgin's tomb was unknown to the new-comers, for all the ancient monuments had been destroyed by the violence of the foemen and time. But when the fabric of the new church was commenced, as a boy ran in hot haste over the floor, the grave of the virgin was broken through, and disclosed her body. At the same time a fragrant odour of balsam breathed through the church, and her body, raised high aloft, wrought so many miracles that floods of people poured in thither. Scarcely could the broad fields contain the crowds, whilst rich and poor together, fired by a common faith, hastened on their way. None came to return without the cure or the mitigation of his malady, and even king's evil, hopeless in the

hands of the leech, departed before the merits of the virgin."

As I stood on the well-shorn turf, the holy scene seemed to come back to me; then, later, the crowd of devout pilgrims overflowing fields and common. I seemed almost to see the bands of eager devotees, to hear their outburst of faith and thanksgiving, and to feel them near. I imagined cripples cured, the blind returning with their sight, all relieved and all blessing the Giver of life and health in their strong belief of the eleventh century.

Miss Arnold Forster, in her admirable work on "Church Dedications," declares that the little leaden geese sometimes dug up in London are the same images that were bought by pilgrims and taken back to their homes from Wenlock.

In 1501, by order of Henry VII., a splendid shrine was built for the bones and relics of St. Milburgha, but after the dissolution of the monasteries, the mob broke in and robbed the tomb of its jewels, and scattered the saint's bones and ashes to the winds.

I thought of all the old stories connected with the place, of the many deeds of piety of the Saxon saint and of her tomb, then of the rough usage of her shrine, and of the demolition of the churches after the Reformation.

The last twenty years has brought great changes, and none are greater than the changes in many of our views respecting the Reformation. No longer a narrow Protestant spirit governs us, or makes us believe that all done at the Reformation was well done, and for the glory of God. We mourn over the ruined churches, the deserted altars, and the loss to the world of so much that was venerable and beautiful.

Bishop Godwin lamented bitterly over the fall of the monasteries. "Godly men," he wrote, "could not approve of the destruction of so many grand churches built," as the bishop expressed it, "for the worship of God by our ancestors. It was deeply to be regretted," he declared, "the diversion of such an amount of ecclesiastical revenues to private use, and the abolition of every place where men might lead a religious life in peace, and retirement from worldly business, devoting themselves wholly to literary toil and meditation."

Till the reign of Henry VIII. England was studded over with beautiful church buildings and monuments. They were centres of learning and culture. Buildwas, the great Cistercian monastery only three miles away, on the banks of the Severn, was famous in the Middle Ages for its workshops, and for the many copies of the Scriptures which were penned there, whilst in many of the monasteries, as even Lord Herbert said, the brothers behaved so well "that not only were their lives exempt from notorious faults, but their spare time was bestowed in writing books, in painting, carving, graving, and the like exercises, so that even their visitors became intercessors for their continuance." But Cromwell would not allow the monks any virtues, and declared brutally that their houses should be thrown down to the foundations, and continued to fill the king's coffers and his private purse with their gold.

Camden wrote: "Up to the thirty-sixth year of Henry VIII.'s reign, there were six hundred and forty-five religious houses erected for the honour of God, the propagation of Christianity and learning, and the support of the poor.

"Then," says the historian, "a storm burst upon the English Church, like a flood, breaking down its banks,

which, to the astonishment of the world and the grief of the nation, bore down the greater part of the religious houses, and with them their fairest buildings.

"These buildings were almost all shortly after destroyed, their monastic revenues squandered, and the wealth which the Christian piety of the English nation had from their first conversion dedicated to God, was in a moment dispersed."

After doing away with the smaller monasteries, Henry VIII. found himself and the State but little richer for the confiscations. The story runs that he complained bitterly to his minister, Cromwell, of the rapacity of his courtiers, and is said to have exclaimed angrily—

"By our Lady! the cormorants, when they have got the garbage, will devour the fish."

"There is more to come, your grace," answered the wily vicegerent.

"Tut, tut, man," the king is supposed to have answered, "my whole realm would not stanch their maws."

Great was the sorrow of the poor at the dissolution. For the monks, as a rule, had been kind masters. They had nursed the sick, and had given away many doles at Christmas and welcome charities. They had fed and had clothed the indigent, and had opened their houses often as places of rest to travellers and to those in distress.

"It was," wrote Strype, "a pitiful thing to hear the lamentations that the people of the country made for the monasteries. For in them," he asserts, "was great hospitality, and by the doing away of the religious houses, it was thought more than 10,000 persons, masters and servants, had lost their living."

Even Latimer, strong, sturdy Protestant that he was, though he flamed with righteous wrath at the abuses that went on in many of the religious houses, prayed that some of the superior and blameless houses might be spared. It was not wise, he thought, to strike all with one sweeping blow, and he begged "that some of the monasteries might continue and be filled with inmates not bound by vows, and revised by stringent statutes, where men in every shire might meditate and give themselves up to holy prayer, and acquire the art of preaching."

"That soul must be low indeed," wrote Cobbett, in his "History of the Protestant Reformation," "which is insensible to all feelings of pride in the noble edifices of its country."

"Love of country, that variety of feelings which all together constitute what we properly call patriotism, consists in part, of the admiration and of veneration for ancient and magnificent proofs of skill, and of opulence.

"The monks built, as well as wrote, for posterity. The never-dying nature of their institutions set aside in all their undertakings every calculation as to time and age. Whether they built, or whether they planted, they set the generous example of providing for the pleasure, the honour, the wealth and greatness, of generations upon generations, yet unborn. They executed everything in the best possible manner. Their gardens, their fish-ponds, farms; in all, in the whole of their economy they set an example tending to make the country beautiful—to make it an object of pride with the people, and to make the nation truly, and permanently great."

Full of these different thoughts, I walked beneath

arch and column, and so away from the old world and its belongings, until I stood before my aviary of canaries. I entered the cage. As I watched my birds I heard a pitter-patter overhead, and, looking up, I saw, leaning against a rail, my little friend Thady Malone.

"Well, Thady," I said, "what has brought you here? I missed you this morning during the May Dance."

"'Deed," said Thady, slowly, "it was sorry I was not to be wid you, for I hear the little leddy danced like a cat in the moonlight, and shone like a glow-worm at the point of day."

"Oh, but Bess didn't dance," I answered laughing.

"But, 'deed, if she had," replied Thady, enthusiastically, "there's not a fairy in auld Oireland that would have kept pace with her, or looked half the darlint."

"Have it your own way, Thady," I said, for I knew that Thady had long since kissed the Blarney Stone. "And now tell me why you didn't come. There were cakes, and singing."

"My mother," answered Thady, solemnly. "It was my mother that was the prevention of my best intentions. My mother," he continued, "is as full of pride as an egg is full of meat. And 'Thady,' she said, in a voice as deep as death, yer leddyship knows her way of speakin', 'yer must never,' she said, 'give the name of your father a downfall. When yer go to her leddyship's sports it must be clad as the best of 'em,' and where were my boots to begin with?" And Thady sighed, and looked down rather piteously at his bare feet.

But a minute later, with the grace of an Irish lad, his face became wreathed in smiles, and he turned to me saying, "Well, though I stayed at home I gave yer

all the good wishes in the world, and as I couldn't be here in the morning, 'tis here I am in the evening."

Then I stepped out of the aviary, and, as I mounted the stairs, I noted that Thady's face had an air of mystery. As I approached him, he held out something in his hand, and said, in a tone of charming apology, "Here is something I have for yer, and for yourself alone. It's never dirt with yer leddyship, whatever it is that a poor lad brings yer," and as I got near, Thady uncovered one hand, and I saw through the fingers of the other a little black bird.

"A jack squealer, begorra," he exclaimed triumphantly, as I reached the same level that he was on. Then Thady went on to say that he had picked him up last night. "He's tired with coming," he explained, "poor bit of a bird, but if yer can keep him safe for a day or two, he'll live to fly with the best over crypt and arch." So Thady and I bore away our prize, and mounted to the old chamber, which is known as the leper's room, and there we deposited our little feathered friend.

"He'll do here," said Thady, "no cat can get him here. Give him a dish of water, and he'll catch flies for himself." The little bird was of a dusty black, with faint green reflections, and with a light drab tint beneath his beak, but with no white whatever under the tail. His short face expressed no fear at human contact. His legs I noted were very short. I put him down on the powdery dust of the chamber. He did not attempt to fly away, but when I placed him against my dress, he ran up my shoulder, to quote Thady's words, "as active as a rabbit in a field of clover."

"He's a late un," said Thady, contemplating his little prize. "'Last to come, first to go,' I've heard 'em

say about swallows, but I don't know if 'tis true or not; but he's pretty in a way, and doesn't know what fear is." Then Thady went on to say nobody hurts a squealer, not even Wenlock boys, even *they* let him be. He's the Almighty's prime favourite, after a wren or a cock robin, Thady gave as an explanation. Then he told me how he found him at the bottom of the Bull Ring last night.

"Tired he was," continued Thady, "like a tired horse that had taken three parties to a wedding. So I took him up safe from the cats; and old Timothy, him as they call Maister Theobalds, he said, leaning on his stick and his smock floating behind him like a petticoat, 'Let the lady of the Abbey have 'im. Varmint and such toys be all in her line. She or the lady Bess wull be sure to like 'im.' So I brought 'im here."

"He is most fascinating," I answered, watching my new pet; "but how can I catch him flies?"

"Let him be," answered Thady; "feeding birds is mostly killing 'em. With water he'll freshen up, and go and get his own meat."

I stood a few minutes watching the little bird. He ran about on the floor, and apparently found what was necessary for his subsistence; but his wings were so weak that he could not rise. Thady disappeared for a moment, and then reappeared with an armful of branches. "These will be a pleasure to him and harbour insects, and such birds like shade. Now he'll do."

We arranged the boughs, and Thady fetched a saucer of water, which he put down. The bird, after a moment's hesitation, plunged in, expanded his wings with a cry of pleasure, and then lay contentedly on the ground.

"He'll be well now," said Thady, "well as Uncle Pat's pig when it got into an orchard of cider apples."

So we shut the old door of the leper's chamber carefully behind us, and descended the steps—overgrown with budding valerian.

"They be wonderfully dressy, be swallows," piped Thady, "in the building of their nests. There's nought that comes amiss to them. Shreds of gauze, scraps of muslin, bits of mud, in fact," he added, "any iligant thing that they can meet with, they dart off with in a minute. 'Tis wonderful the fancy and the invention of the craythures. In August they'll go, this sort; but where they go there's few as knows."

I was about to return to the Abbey, when Thady stopped me. "I've somethin' else to show you, somethin' as you'll be pleased wid," he said.

"What is it?"

"A real pretty bird," was Thady's answer. "None of yer common kinds. The cock is the bonniest little fellow I have ever seen; fire snaps, I call 'em,—that's the name that Ben O'Mally called one that we saw together near Birmingham. He's about the size of a robin, but 'tis a more spirited tail that he has, a black waistcoat, and a lavender head. None of your mud-pie midgeon tits, but a real gay hopper. About the bonniest little fellow that I have ever seen. He's got a flash of brightness about him, like the foreign flower that Mister Burbidge declared he would whip the life out of me if I touched. Jump the flame, the blazer, and kitty bran-tail, I've heard him called in different places; but call 'em what they will, they all think a lot of him."

Then I asked Thady about the plumage of the little hen.

"Oh, the missus," answered Thady. "Well she's purty but not so fine as her mate. She's a bitter duller, and the fire has gone out of her tail."

"Where is the nest?" I asked.

Thady did not answer, but walked across the ruined church to a broken column, and there, sure enough, in a little hole screened from the winds by a spray of budding eglantine, I found the nest of the redstart. The eggs, of which there are four, reminded me of those of the hedge-sparrow; but the blue was fainter, and on one or two I noticed a few dim brownish specks. Then we retired quickly, for hovering close by was the brilliant little cock bird himself. How beautiful he was! Like a vision of the tropics. The redstart is never found in great numbers in Shropshire, but every year there is a pair that comes and builds somewhere in our ruined church. Three years ago they built in a wall, last year in a crevice in the crypt, and this year in a ruined column.

The redstart visits our shores in April, and always commands attention by his brilliant plumage. He is a bold bird and not easily frightened. He dips his tail up and down, with a movement which recalls that of a water-wagtail, only it is not so fussy, or continuous; and when he flies, he leaves behind him the vision of a red-hot coal on the wing, so glorious are the feathers on the top of the tail.

I begged Thady to show no one the nest. Nests are best kept dead secrets, and this one, I said, will be a joy and an interest to me for the next two months.

"I've somethin' more," and Thady hesitated—"and a real beauty," he added. "I know yer was occupied with play-acting and entertainments and what not," and Thady waved his hand majestically, as if on May morning of 1904 ours had been the revels of Kenilworth, and added "it isn't beasts, and birds, that the gentry care for at such times, so I waited my time," and Thady beckoned to me to follow.

I crossed the garden, and let myself out by the lily gates while Thady stepped over the wall, and found myself in a few minutes' time across the meadows and standing with Thady by the furthest point of the old Abbey fish-ponds.

"'Tisn't often as this sort will come down from the hills and the wild ground," Thady said. "They are wild folk and belong to the north moorland. I've never heard of a rock-jack here. Some folks call 'em burn-dippers." I looked, and saw amongst the branches of an old willow a nest which was not unlike that of a blackbird, but the eggs were not quite the same, being splashed with spots of a reddish brown on a ground of a brighter green.

"What is it?" I asked, for Thady's country names did not convey much to me. And then I saw, not far off on the grass, a bird not unlike the familiar blackbird, or black ouzel of the garden, as some country folks still call him, save that he had a white throat. It was the first that I ever saw in England, although I believe the ring-ouzel is not uncommon on the Church Stretton hills; but on cultivated land, save in a few parts of Scotland, he is always a rare visitor."

I watched him hop about, with the same heavy flop of his cousin, the blackbird, but I noted that his plumage was not so brilliant as our garden favourite. He had greener shades in the black, and his plumage was almost of a rusty brown in places. Underneath his throat he had a brilliant white tie. He was certainly a handsome fellow. His movements recalled those of a blackbird, but he had not the "yellow dagger" that Tennyson praised, and at our approach he did not make his exit with the angry rattle which is so characteristic of our garden friend.

"Why, Thady," I said, "I am pleased. The ring

ouzel is a very rare English bird. At least, so they say in books."

"Begorra, I have never seen one in these parts but once," answered Thady, "and that was in Sherlot Forest by the lake."

Then we got back over the rails, and I followed Thady to one of the small plantations where the young trees were about twenty years old.

"What else have you got?" for Thady was beginning to run, so great evidently was his impatience to show me something that he knew of.

"A nest of the finest singer in Shropshire," replied Thady, "as good, some say, as the nightingale. I've heard him called the mock nightingale, and by others the coal tuft, Jack smut, and black the chimney. Anyway, whatever they like to call him, he's a fine songster for all his poor dull feathers. He can pipe loud and full right across a wood, and then warble soft as a nope's bride. He won't stay here in August, and flies away with the first of the swallows."

Then I recalled the olive woods in Southern France, and remembered how sweetly I had heard the black-caps sing in March mornings from the Hotel Bellevue windows. I looked at the little nest built in the branches of a budding bramble; it was not unlike that of a robin, save that it had no moss interwoven in its structure, and that it was entirely lined with horse hair and the hair off the backs of the red and white cows of the country. Inside I saw three eggs of a palish, reddish brown, sprinkled over with spots of purple. I could not help noticing how different the three eggs were.

"I've never before found eggs like this so early," said Thady. "Generally the Jack smuts take a deal of time to settle, but this pair have a-nested and laid as

soon as they got to the parish." I bent over the nest. "Don't touch 'em," cried Thady, excitedly, "since it's yer leddyship's pleasure to leave them; for the mock warbler, as dad calls him, he says are as shy as a hawk, and a touch of the nest will make 'em quit in a twinkling. Some morning, yer leddyship," Thady continued, "yer must come down and hear him. If yer was to get outside the fence, yer'd catch him some day singing. For he's got a strange voice, soft and pretty at one moment as if he was charming, and the next as if telling the tales of a thousand victories."

Thady and I walked home in the twilight. I love seeing the nests of God's little wild birds. How wonderfully they are built. What marvellous architects birds are, how clever and dexterous, with claw and beak.

In the still light of the dying day, the old spire of the parish church loomed like a gigantic lance across the rich meadows, and through the stillness I heard the sound of the chimes. They filled this old English spot with a sense of rest. No hurry, they seemed to call, no hurry. Leisure, the best gift of the gods, is yours and ours. Time to wander, time to see, time to sleep. I stood and gazed on the quiet scene. All the pleasant things of spring and summer were before us. White mists were gathering from the beck and running in long lines of diaphanous obscurity across the fields. There was no sound but the distant chimes. All was sinking gently to rest.

I entered the eastern gate and called to Mrs. Langdale, the old housekeeper, and begged her to give me a hunch of cake to bestow on Thady. The good dame handed it through the mullioned window sourly enough, for Thady was no favourite with such a barn-door-natured woman as my old housekeeper. "'Tis

little I'd get if yer leddyship wasn't here," laughed Thady. "'Get out and don't poison the place with yer breath, yer limb of Satan,'—that's what I'd hear if yer wasn't by, to stand by me," Thady whispered, as Mrs. Langdale shut the window with an angry snap.

I passed the hunch of cake to Thady, and quickly, silently he put it into his voluminous pocket, in which it disappeared as in a well. Then Thady lifted his cap, and a second later I heard him whistling softly in the gloaming.

As I went into the chapel hall I was greeted by Constance. I congratulated her warmly on her successful morning. Nothing could have been better, I said. It was a real scene of gaiety, and gave, I am sure, all the young and old, a great deal of enjoyment.

"There not a budding boy or girl this day
But is got up and gone to bring in May,"

I quoted laughingly. "The old times will come back to Wenlock, thanks to you, Constance," I said. "Over each house will be hung bough and garlands, till each household is given up to laughter and frolic."

"There is much wisdom in wholesome laughter," my friend replied. "Perhaps the best thing that can be done for the people is to teach them how to play. They have almost forgotten how, in their desire to make money."

Then my friend and I parted.

After dinner I wandered into the garden. It was a lovely night. The moon was hardly seen, only in faint peeps at intervals, but there was a mist of stars. I faintly saw the vane of the flying crane pointing due south, and in the distance I heard the hoot of an owl far away in the Abbot's Walk. In the pathway I saw

dim shadowy creatures, which turned out to be toads enjoying the cool moisture of the night. Far away, in a cornfield, I caught the harsh cry of the cornercrake, calling, calling—as he would call, I knew, all through the May nights. A little later, and over Windmoor Hill on the sheep-nipped turf would glisten nature's jewel, the glow-worm, but early in May such gems are rarely to be met with in our cold country. How lovely it was to wander round the garden and ruined church—to inhale the scent of the budding lilac, and the poet's narcissus in the grass, for where pious knees once knelt was then a milky way of floral stars. They glittered in the grass like faint jewels, and their rich perfume gave the evening air an intoxicating sweetness.

My great hound walked at my heels. At night she is always watchful, and is haunted by a persistent sense of danger. But even she, that still night, could find nothing to be alarmed about, or to hurl defiance at. All the world seemed bathed in a mystic sapphire bath of splendour, and round me I knew that mystic process of what we call life was silently but rapidly taking form. I could almost feel the budding of the trees, for the wonderful revelation of summer was at hand. To-night, on an ancient larch, one of the first I have heard that was planted in Shropshire, a storm-cock, as the country people call the missel-thrush, piped into the growing night. What a joyous song his was. He had sung on and off, since January, and his voice was almost the loudest and clearest of all the feathered songsters. No cold could daunt him, but soon he would be silent, for the storm-cock sings little after May.

The world, where not spoilt by smoke and man, was very fair and full of wonderful things. All was flowering and growing apace. As I stood in the ruined church,

love and joy seemed to be borne upon the soft winds as they fanned my face and played amongst the tender leaves. I sat down by the ancient lavabo and looked at the ruined church. How much the walls might tell me if they could but speak. What stories of stately processions, for kings and queens were often the guests of the Prior of Wenlock. Henry I., Henry III., and his queen Eleanor came, if tradition says true, Charles Stuart, when fate fought against him, and Impetuous Rupert, at least to Wenlock. Then the story runs that Arthur and his Spanish bride passed through Wenlock on their way to Ludlow. And as I sat there and mused, I thought of all the great ones who had passed through and spent days, happy or otherwise, at Wenlock—the world's delight and wonder, they were all gone, and the Abbey too, which was once the pride of Catholicism in Shropshire, the meeting-place of devout pilgrims, the resort of royalty, that too had gone. Its walls have served to build cottages. Its splendour is a thing of the past, and the owl and the wild birds fly where once abbot and friar paced in solemn devotion.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the church was used as a quarry, the old folks have often said. "No need to dig out stone," one old wheezy man told me; "when cottages was run up, us used to know where to go, for pigsties, or even a patch on the road. Have in a cart, and down went a bit of the Abbey. It was mighty handy, a deal better than blasting the rock as they do now to rear a wall."

"King Collins," as the old people used to call Sir Watkin's agent, who lived in the red-brick house which is now the Vicarage, carted away whatever he had a mind to. "What he set his heart on that he took," another old man said, "and put it afore his own door."

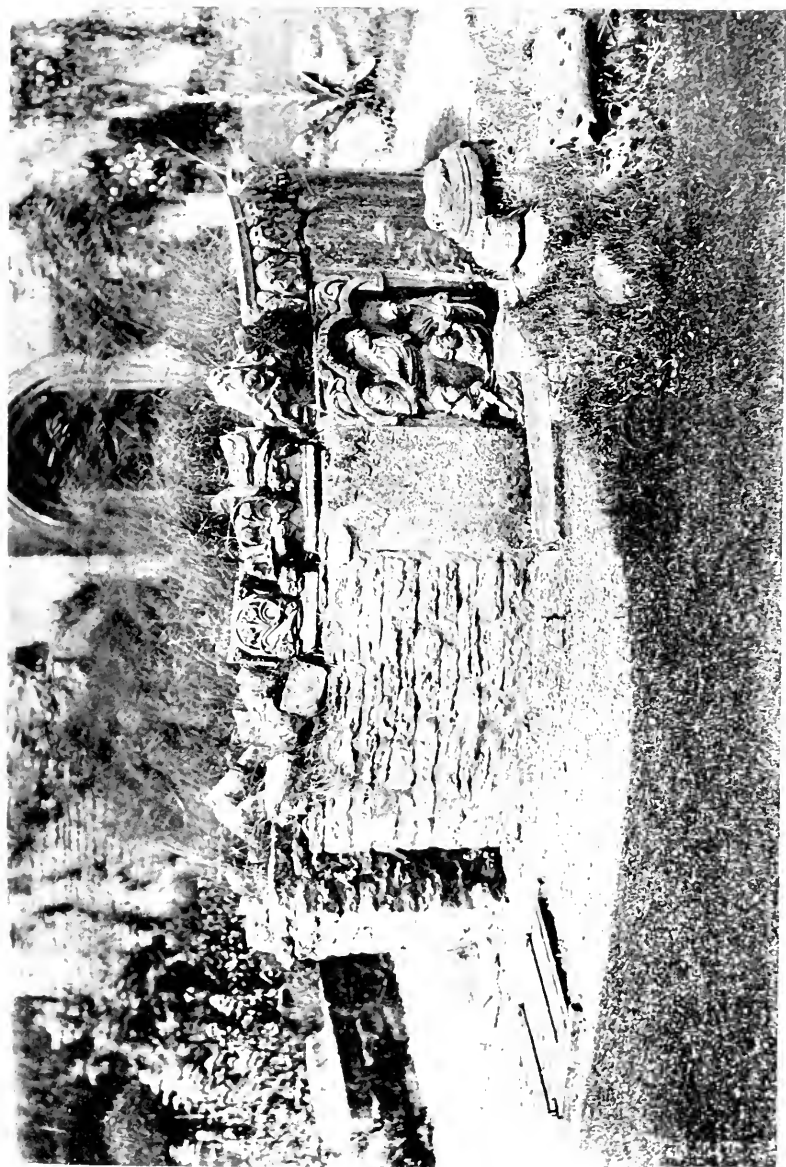


Photo by Mr. W. Gollins.

I thought of all the changes that Wenlock had seen, beginning with the foundation of the Saxon nunnery. Then later of Roger de Montgomery's Clugniac monks—the fame of the great Abbey, the Dissolution, poor John Cressage, its last Prior, the Civil Wars, and the breaking up of the Abbey fabric through the nineteenth century. Life often seems to go so slowly, and yet how many changes Wenlock—and for that matter, every yard of English soil—has seen, since the dawn of English history, up to this twentieth century.

Here we were in the year 1904, I mused, and this little plot of ground on which I sat had seen a Saxon saint go by. It had been traversed by Roger de Montgomery, Cromwell's soldiers had fired across it with cannon, and all the while, sun and rain had had their turns, and soft spring showers had rejoiced daisy and lady's-slipper. Deep winter snows had enshrined tomb and arch, and all the natural changes of season and climate had occurred, and will recur to the end of time. Ah, there are many thoughts to ponder over merely in a handful of British earth!

As I sat on, lost in thought, my great hound's head resting at my feet, the silence was broken by the sound of the old church clock. It struck eleven. I touched the grass at my feet: it was wet with dew.

From behind me as I rose came strongly in a soft breeze all the perfumes of the sweet things then in flower, and as I passed out of the cloisters my last vision was the mead of narcissi nodding softly in the night wind.

Mouse and I turned back out of the lily gate, and so into the quadrangle. Light flashed from the hanging lamps in the ambulatory, and I heard in the distance the refrain of an old Brittany song, that Auguste was singing in his kitchen. Half an hour

later not a sound, and the lights were put out, and all was still. Only the scents of the honeysuckle and the budding lilac reached me from my open casement, and the cry of the corncrake, which seemed mysteriously to record the passing of the hours and the passing of all things—Kings, Queens, Abbots, Kingdoms and Commonwealths. So musing I fell asleep.

Several weeks later I rose “betimes,” as they say here, and whilst the dew was lying like a mantle of diamonds on the glistening turf. I stepped off to the old red-walled garden and visited the beds of tulips.

My late tulips were all out in a blaze of beauty—rose, red, white, yellow, and gold, whilst some were splashed with sombre purple. On the walls, the creepers were all clad in green, and the honeysuckles cast their perfume in all the corners of the garden. But I did not stop to linger; a wild spirit was on me, and I made my way across the golden meadows, past the fern-clad hill, and beyond what folks call here the paddock. I walked on, faithful Mouse following closely, until I reached the bottom of the hill on which the hamlet of Wyke is built, and then I turned to the north, and retraced my steps by Farley Dingle.

What an enchantingly beautiful thing the dew on the opening flowers of the dog-rose is, and how delicate are the red shades of the opening fronds of the bracken. Then I saw other treasures, none of which were more lovely than some pink cheeked oak-apples, encircled in the golden tassels of the oak blossom.

Why does one not get up every morning? I said to myself. Why miss daily the enchantments of morning? The dew, the scents, and the sunshine were all delicious.

I returned through the little town. Life was just

beginning. Shops were opening. A few people drove past in noisy carts. Mothers were preparing their children to go to school. Men were going to work after their breakfasts, to the near fields, or in the shops; whilst whelp, and hound, and pup, were all gaily frolicking in the streets.

I saw little friends go by. They laughed and bowed to me. Nearly all the little lads had got, I noticed, a sprig of oak leaves in their cap, for it was the 29th of May, Royal Oak Apple Day, as the folks call it; and some of them as they passed called out—

“Royal Oak
I Whig provoke,”

and pointed to the badge in their caps.

Shropshire is the land of loyalty, and people still cherish there the memory of the hiding of the King at Boscobel.

The 29th of May is the anniversary of Charles II.'s Restoration, and the custom since then of wearing oak leaves on that day still lingers on in many counties.

I read once a terrible story of two soldiers in George I.'s time who were nearly flogged to death in 1716 for putting oak sprigs in their hats.

The Royal Oak, wrote Stukeley, “stood a bow shot from the house (of Boscobel). Into this tree, Colonel Carlos and the King climbed by the aid of a hen-roost ladder. Members of the family fed them by fastening the victuals to a nut hook. The tree is now enclosed with a brick wall in the inside of which are placed laurels. Close to the oak is a thriving plant reared from one of its acorns.”

The story runs that the King, in gratitude, collected some acorns at a later date from the oak which had

afforded him a shelter, had them planted in St. James's Park, and watered them with his own hands.

Are they still growing? I have often asked myself; or have they perished like the Stuart line and cause? Be this as it may, the custom of wearing the oak is still dear to Shropshire lads, and at Wenlock any lad "who will not mount the green" is considered fair game for other little lads to pummel and cuff.

As I walked down Sheinton Street I noticed that three little boys came out of a house together. Suddenly a little lad passed them without the orthodox "tuft of green." With a wild whoop the little lads gave chase. "Bash and bummel him," they called. "Have at 'un."

I hardly think they knew what they were making this onslaught on a comrade for, but they would have vaguely told you, if they could, that it was not what Etonians would call "good form" to appear at Wenlock on the 29th of May without a "badge of green."

I stood and watched the chase. My little Roundhead was not caught. He dodged his pursuers adroitly, and in the midst of the hunt the school-bell sounded, so for a moment an armistice was declared.

Before I went in I visited my beds of anemone and ranunculi. What is there of such enchanting brilliancy as the exquisite scarlet anemone, the well-known wind flower of the Pyrenees, as I have heard it called, with its dazzling scarlet blossoms? But my few clumps were over. This lovely variety I have never known "a free grower," as gardeners call it, in the North, but in Sussex and Hampshire it is said to do well. The roots that I had out then were the exquisite double sorts, and some of the large flowering single varieties. Amongst my most beautiful named sorts I saw by the labels were—Rose de Nice, a delicate satiny rose, Snowball, and

Rose Mignon, which last is of a splendid deep shade of pink. There were also Chapeau de Cardinal, Fire King, and la Dame Blanche. How lovely they all were, and how vividly they brought back to me the florists' shops at Nice, Cannes, and Mentone. How well I remembered the big bunches in all colours in their picturesque green jars of native pottery. But more beautiful still was the recollection of the sheets of anemones as I saw them in Sir Thomas Hanbury's beautiful garden of La Mortola. They were principally single, and raised from seed by his gardener, I was told. What a glory of colour they made with the cypress trees, ilexes and orange groves as a background, mingling with daffodils and cyclamen, whilst the air was laden with the scent of orange and lemon-blossom.

I recalled the glory of these lovely visions. Even here in England a few patches seemed to add greatly to the beauty and joy of a garden. Then I stopped and picked a few sprays to copy in my curtain. Whilst thus engaged, I was conscious that some one was approaching me. I looked up, and saw my little girl's governess, Miss Weldon. By her troubled face I knew that she had unpleasant news to communicate; in fact, I was sure the unpleasant rock of Worry was ahead.

I listened, and Bess's delinquencies were poured forth into my unwilling ears. My little maid, it appeared, had bitten the nursery maid, slapped her nurse, and had ended in a fit of rage by throwing her lesson-books in her governess' face. She had flatly refused to do any lessons to-day. In fact, I was told, she had declined "to study" ever since the excitement of the recitals for the May dance; and Miss Weldon declared that she did not approve of public performances, and pursed up her lips severely.

I did not wait to hear any more for, to quote Burbidge, "the less of a disagreeable you mind, the better for your supper," but I went straight into the house. I went up the old newel stairs and found Bess on the floor of the nursery. The whole room resounded with her angry cries. "Horrid slug, stupid snail," and other words of opprobrium I heard in quick reiteration. She kicked, screamed, and vowed she hated everybody and everything, with a furious, scarlet face. Even old Nana did not escape her abuse. There was nothing to be done but to put Bess to bed, and tell her that there she must remain till I could forgive her, and let her get up again.

"I hate you, mother!" she cried in a shower of tears. "When I'm rich I'll buy a new mother." And as I closed the door an angry little voice called out, "I'd sell you all for sixpence; you're all horrid, horrid!"

I tried to seek peace with my crewels and my needle, and bethought myself of the bunch of anemones which in haste I had thrown upon a table in the chapel hall. But peace that day might not be mine. War, black war, seemed to have set in in all parts of my demesne. Célestine bounced in like a whirlwind of discord and fury.

"Cette odieuse femme! Cet animal empesté!" by which civil terms she alluded to the old housekeeper, who had done something unpardonable; "mais j'aurai ma place quand même." Then followed a string of incoherent abuse. A second afterwards, Mrs. Langdale appeared, took up the tale, and vindicated her honour and position. The two women glared at each other like wild cats, and set to work to abuse each other roundly, each in her own mother tongue. Célestine spoke in high southern French, breathless, scarlet, her

eyes burning like live coals, whilst Mrs. Langdale screamed shrilly in angry Shropshire tones. Our old housekeeper does not generally speak in her native dialect, but in moments of excitement she takes to it as to her native element. Her voice ran up like the women's of the west, and she trembled with fury as she called forth judgments on foreigners, "furies, and such like good-for-nothing losellers and vagrants."

So great was their indignation and so near did they approach each other in passion, that I feared they must come to blows; but at last they vanished, vowing vengeance, and filling the monks' passage with cries of discord. The *causa belli* was difficult to discover, but there seemed to have been a disagreement over a towel, a bit of soap, and some key of a cupboard. Anyway, what was wanting in wit, was fully made up by wrath.

How eloquent, at least how voluble, two furious women of the lower classes can be, like Shakespeare's women, in their flights of rage. With us the power of vituperation is a power of the past. We control ourselves and our anger smoulders in our hearts, but rarely flies forth in a whirlwind of words.

At last I was left with Mouse, and alone we sat on, hoping only for peace. How good life would be without its worries and its quarrels. Mouse and I looked at each other. "My dog," I said, "you have one great merit: you cannot speak."

CHAPTER VI

JUNE

"Now is the time for mirth,
Nor cheek or tongue be dumbe,
For the flowrie earth
The golden pomp is come."

HERRICK.

YES, the golden pomp had come. The earth was radiant. Down below the Abbey extended sheets of golden buttercups, the world was full of song, and a clear turquoise sky, cloudless and glorious, rose above us, and all through the joyous days we were bathed in glad sunshine.

Peace had come, inside and outside the house. The storms that ended May had vanished, and my domestic coach seemed rolling gaily along. Bess had grown good again, the roughest children sometimes do. The lessons were learnt without too much grumbling, and Miss Weldon no longer carried her head low with shame. Mrs. Langdale and Célestine had settled down into hostile neutrality, and for that I was thankful.

"Ma'zelle's tongue is like a firebrand, but I give her no chance, I never speak to her," my old friend told me. And as angry silence is better than open war, I received its advent with thanksgiving; but all messages were impossible, and I suspected Fremantle had

hard work to steer his boat between the sullen seas of "the room."

But a truce to domestic worries, for early in June I gardened; that is to say, I stood about on the close-shorn turf and Burbidge gave directions for the summer plants to be put in the beds. This always is a solemn summer function, and Burbidge had all the importance of a Prime Minister moving amongst his Cabinet, whilst I stood by and admired.

On the east side of the Abbey Farmery, as it was once called, we had already put in round beds of heliotrope (the old cherry-pie of childhood). Burbidge had planted a bed of scarlet verbenas, and was, when I went out, putting in one of the delicate pure white variety, that smells so sweet after a passing shower in the twilight. Besides these, there were to be spudded in beds of crimson and scarlet geraniums, near the high southern wall running from the oratory to the gazebo. We had planted, a few years before, sweet tea-roses of all colours—pink, orange, and copper, a *Choisya ternata*, the orange-blossom of Mexico, patches of close-clinging Virginian creeper, to enjoy their autumn glory, and over the pillars different varieties of large-flowering clematises. These, as they make their full growth, will be tied to the stone balls that crown the wall. The clematises are of the most beautiful modern sorts, mauve, lavender, and purple, and in August and September, I trust, will repay us amply for our care during the dark winter months, and in the sharp winds of March.

Burbidge was solemnly having his plants brought out, and stood watching that no mishap took place, for, he assured me, "boys were born careless."

Round the sundial were to be planted four scarlet

plots of geraniums, and all were to be edged with a ribbon of blue lobelia. "How commonplace!" some of my readers will exclaim; but all the same, very gay and cheery during the late summer and early autumn, and a brilliant note of colour when the glory of the herbaceous borders is over. We must always remember that there are many forms of beauty, and that even the newest one day will be old-fashioned, and that a fashion immediately past may have something to commend it, in spite of the gardening papers of the day, and *learned critics*. When the beds were planted and the tiny little string of lobelia added, then the wire netting that encircled each bed was carefully put back, or otherwise, to quote Burbidge, "Adam and his crew would soon be the death of the greenhouse stuff, sure enough."

After that, we planted a bed of heliotrope, of a beautiful Jamaica variety, that was brought back from there by a friend; and then a bed or two of fuchsias, including a few two- or three-year-old standards in the centre, for nothing gives a bed greater beauty than that it should be of different heights. The old flat bed was poor and ugly, and did not give half the effect of colour that one does of different heights. Then I saw put out beds of latana, red, yellow, and brown, and salmon and pink geraniums, and the old stone troughs and tubs were filled with rich velvety petunias. After all the small beds were planted, we came to the long border immediately in front of the new southern wall. There Burbidge put in squares of that dear old plant known to children as the lemon verbena plant, and great patches of many different sorts of sweet-scented geraniums. Amongst these delights were the old peppermint, the rose geranium, the lemon-scented, the citron-scented, the apple-scented, and the pennyroyal, and some of the

best of the named sorts, such as Little Gem, Pretty Polly, Lady Plymouth, Shottesham Park, and Lady Scarborough. Altogether, Burbidge told me with pride, there were not less than twenty sorts. All these perfumed pelargoniums have a delicious fragrance of their own, distinct, and exquisitely sweet. All will bed out well in an English garden, but care should be taken to plant out in the same bed sorts that grow about the same height, as some varieties are much more vigorous than others in the open, and, to quote Burbidge's words, "fair trample down the weaker sorts, like horses wud childer, if yer put 'em alongside."

In this long border there were also placed round bushes of Paris Marguerites, and here and there Burbidge slipped in a castor-oil plant with its overshadowing handsome foliage and horse-chestnut-like fruit, and at intervals a spike of cannas, and a plant or two of tasselled maize with variegated leaf, "to bring them tropics home," I was told. Then in the foreground, "his boys" spudded in African marigolds, soft mauve violas, asters, and stocks, besides patches of geraniums, to bring in "a smart snap of colour," as my old gardener put it.

After luncheon I went out on the other side of the old house, to what is known as the Quadrangle, to witness further garden operations. I pleaded in favour of putting into some of the tubs what Burbidge calls "some nosegay blows." Burbidge acceded to my request; "But us must mind the colours too," he declared. He put in, however, to please me, a few little brown evening stocks, that smell sweetest at nights, for I told him that it was delightful to come and sit out after dinner, and enjoy the scents of night. He put in a few verbenas also, for the chance of evening showers, some nicotianas,

and a few crimson humeas. Round the old redstone building, he planted three rows of Jacoby geraniums, "For them will mean brightness," he said.

As I stood and watched the last row of geraniums being put in the soil, I was joined by Bess and Mouse.

"Oh, mum!" Bess told me, "Mouse has been growling and growling at something behind the ivy. If it had been at night, I should say she had met a devil or ogre. Every minute she was with Nana and me, she got crosser and crosser; and see, her nose is quite red and bleeding, just like Hals' when he tumbled downstairs. Could it be a real robber?" and Bess's eyes opened wide.

"No," I answered, "I don't think it could be a robber; but let's go and see."

So we started off across the gravel. Mouse ran on ahead, as if anxious to show us something. Suddenly she stopped with a whimper. I followed on, jumped down the crypt, and, peering behind the ivy leaves, soon discovered the cause of my dog's excitement and displeasure. I found half covered up with dead leaves and rolled tightly into a ball of prickles, a poor little hedgehog.

"For shame, Mouse!" I cried, and called her off. For Mouse, at the sight of the poor little beast, growled angrily, and wished once more to go for her antagonist.

"Better to kill un'," said Burbidge, who had arrived on the scene. "Hedgehogs baint good for naught. They be milk-suckers, and death on the squire's game."

For like most country-folks, Burbidge's hand was against hedgehogs. Burbidge had in his hand a rake, and was about to strike the poor little prickly creature, but I interposed.

"They do no harm. Besides, this is my sanctuary," I said. "In the Abbey Church no bird or beast may be harmed."

Burbidge walked away growling, "Varmint should be killed anywhere."

Then Bess and I went and inspected the little ball of spikes.

"See, Bess," I said, "how it defends itself. All the winter this hedgehog has slept amongst a bed of dead ivy leaves, and so has passed long months. But now that summer has returned it will walk about, and at nights he will crop the grass, and eat insects."

Mouse looked abashed at my lavishing notice on a hedgehog, and jumped up on a bank of thyme and watched intently what I was doing. Great Danes are remarkably sensitive dogs, and the mildest rebuke is often sufficient to make them miserable for long spells. A friend of mine, who had a very large one, said, "I never dared do more than whip its kennel. As a puppy, that was punishment enough." So I spoke gently to Mouse, and said, "You must never hurt hedgehogs again." At this, Mouse gravely descended from her heights, sat down by my side, and inspected the hedgehog, and I felt certain she would never hurt one again.

Then I said to Bess that perhaps there were some little hedgehogs not far off, funny little creatures, born with little, almost soft, prickles; and I told the child how useful they were in a garden. How they feed on slugs and insects, and how, when introduced in a kitchen, they would even eat black beetles.

"Once," I told my little maid, "I had read that a poor scullion, in the Middle Ages, had one that he taught to turn the spit. So you see, Bess," I said, "hedgehogs can be very useful creatures; not at all the wicked

murderous race that Burbidge would wish you to believe."

Bess looked at me askance. "I cannot like them as much as you, mama," she answered in a pained voice; "for Nana said too that they sucked the cows. And see how this one has pricked poor Mouse's nose."

"Well, let us leave the hedgehog," at last I said, "and wash foolish Mouse's wounds." So we wandered off to the fountain, and dipped our handkerchiefs into the clear water, and washed my great hound's fond and foolish nose.

At first, Mouse objected; but as Bess told her, "One gets used to washing, same as lessons," so after a minute or two, she sat by us until we had washed away all traces of the fray.

As we were thus engaged, Auguste, the French cook, went by. I noticed, as he passed us, that he carried in his hand a basket.

"Voyez, madame," he cried. "Quelle belle trouvaille. Elles sont superbes." And he showed me a mass of creepy, crawly, slimy brown snails. Auguste was as proud as if he had found a basketful of new-laid eggs, and proposed with his aides to have a magnificent *souper*. "Quelle luxe!" I heard him say to himself, as he made his way to his kitchen, "et dire dans toute cette valetaille il n'y a que nous, qui en voudrions."

Auguste will steep them in cold water, and then cook them. I must honestly confess I have never had the courage to eat one, but I believe now that there is a growing demand for escargots in London, and I have been told that in one shop alone, more than a hundred thousand are sold each season.

"Come on, mamsie," at last cried Bess. "Even Nana couldn't make Mouse cleaner." So my little maid and I went off hand-in-hand across the well-tended lawns of the Cloister garth.

Bess was full of confidences. "Mamsie," said my little maid, "I never want to grow any older, 'cause why—I should have to wear long, long dresses, like grown-ups, and then, how could I climb the trees. But I should like all days to go on just the same as to-day—no lessons, no rain, no governesses, nobody but you and me and Mouse."

I caught something of the child's enthusiasm. The glory of the summer was like an intoxicating draught. "Wouldn't it be lovely, dear," I said, "to have no commonplaces, no tiresome duties—only summer and the song of birds; and never to catch cold, or feel ill, or tired, or worried?"

Bess laughed, and we kissed each other.

We walked on along the path that encircled the ruins. Young, fat, flopperty thrushes, with large brown eyes and short tails, hopped about the grass. On the bough of a lime tree, we came across a line of little tom-tits, nine in a row. There they sat, chirping softly, or charming, as the people call it here. The poor parent birds, in an agony of terror, flew backwards and forwards, imploring their offspring to return to the nest, but the young ones took no notice. They would not believe in the existence of such monsters as boys or cats. They, too, like us, were charmed with the sunshine and the gaiety of the outside world, and utterly declined to go back to what folks call here, "their hat of feathers." A little further on, however, our enthusiasms received a chill. In the branches of a dead laurel, that I had for some time been watching, was a

thrush's nest, and it was deserted. The mother-bird had sat day and night, and I had watched the tips of her brown tail, or met, at intervals, the gaze of her round anxious eye. And now the nest was forsaken. How sad ! She had become almost a friend. For days, after breakfast, I had brought out a saucer full of bread and milk, and placed it at a respectful distance from the nest. And yet in spite of all my care, behold ! an enemy had come in the night, some horrid boy or evil cat, and the thrush had forsaken the nest, and we lamented over the eggs—cold as stones.

I showed Bess the nest. "How wicked !" cried Bess, "to frighten off a poor bird like that. Well, I am sure," she added, "the wicked creature that has done that ought to go to prison. Perhaps Barbara, the housemaid," she continued, after a moment's reflection, "might tell her policeman. Policemen should be of use, sometimes."

With a sense of regret, I retraced my steps, till I reached the tourist's wicket, that leads into the public road. Seated close by, on a mossy bank, I found old Timothy Theobalds.

I told him about the forsaken thrush's nest.

"Lord, love yer, marm !" he answered contemptuously, "they be as common as blackberries, be thrushes ; there's any amount of they—there be one not a hundred yards off, just on the ground. The feathered gentry will fly, give 'em a week or so. I don't think nothin' of they. But I do remember a yellow water wagtail's nest, when I was a boy. It war down by the pond. I was stayin' with grandam, and the missus that lived here at the farm had a fine lot of white ducks then. Well, she seed me one day speerin' round, and her thought I war arter her ducks. 'What be yer lookin' round here for ?' her cried

out, furious. I told her I was arter a yellow dip-tail, but her wouldn't believe me. 'I'll mak' yer know the taste of the willow'—for there was a great one then by the pond—'and yer won't wish to know it twice,' her said. Farmer folk war masterful then," mused old Timothy; "they held the land from the gentry, and the land was meat and drink."

After a pause I asked the old man if he was not enjoying the sunshine.

"Pretty fair," he replied. "But how about the apples? 'Tis good," he acknowledged, "a bit of summer; but yer should have know'd the summers in the old days," he exclaimed; "they war built up by plenty. Now," he said, sadly, "there's always somethin' agin' summer, like there be agin' most things. Summer blows bain't enough to content poor folks like me. Us old 'uns want our apples bobbin' in beer come Christmas."

I then remembered hearing a few days before that the apple-blossom had been sadly nipped by the late spring frosts.

"Them as is rich can buy the foreigners," pursued Master Theobalds, "but to poor folks, frosts mean the end of pleasure. But there bain't like to be much fruit now in the orchards," he continued, "since folks have given up the decent customs of their forefathers."

"What ones?" I asked. "And how did folks in the years gone by prevent frosts, and blights?"

"You'll hear, you'll hear," and old Timothy, in a high squeaky voice of ninety years and more, told me of old Wenlock customs long since forgotten.

"I mind me," he pursued, "when it war different; but in grandam's time, it was a regular custom for them as had apple trees and plum orchards to get the

young men to go round and catch round the trees with their arms——”

“What good did that do?” I asked, somewhat surprised.

“What good!” and old Timothy glared at me for this impertinent interpellation. “Why, mam, it was accounted a deed of piety in those days ‘to march’ the orchards, as folks called it. Religion war a different thing altogether, even when I war a lad,” he said sadly. “The devil we thought a lot of ‘im in my time—always raging and rampaging up and down, it was supposed. Now, from what I hear, he seems a poor lame kind of played-out devil, broken-winded and drugged; not the rowdy, handsome chap us used to be afeard of. Years agone we thought he could get anywhere—in our houses, in our cupboards, up the chimney, down the wells, anywhere. ‘Keep him out,’ parsons used to say; and us thought us had done a good job if us could keep him out of our gardens, and from our fruit trees. So the lustiest lads of a parish would come round, call out a benediction, and tramp round. They would—they that war nimble with their fists—have a set-to, mostly, at Wenlock, in the churchyard. Many’s the match I’ve a-seen. Two young fellows fighting, fair and square, as Christians should, and after they had found the best man, they’d go and brace the trees. ‘Apple Howlers’ folks used to call ‘em, and the best man war captain of the lot.”

“What did they do?”

“Why, they used to march in smocks, and with garlands and blows, same as on May Day. Holy Thursday war the great day, I’ve heard tell, and ‘em used to shout till ‘em fair broke their lungs, singing such old songs as ‘Blow winter snows across the plain,’ ‘Fair shines my lady’s garden,’ ‘Spring voices strong,’ and ‘Phœbus

smiles on groves anew.' Who Phœbus was I never knowd," remarked old Timothy, "but Salter Mapps used to sing that finely and mak' the whole place alive when he roared it out."

"And the maids," I said, "did they have no part in the merry-making?"

"The maids," answered Master Theobalds, severely, "held their peace. If they did anything, they peeped out of the winders, waved hankies, and kissed their hands. 'Twas enough for the maids in those days."

"Yes; but tell me," I urged, "about the rite. What did the young men do in the orchards?"

"Why, them rampaged round like young cart colts on spring grass, and they seized each others' hands and danced aunty-praunty, as if their arms were made of cart-ropes, round the trees, and they capered like young deer, as the deer do at Apley Park, up beyond Bridgenorth, and they kind of hugged a tree, crying out—

" 'Stand fast root, bear well top,
God send us a youngling sop.
Every twig big apple,
Every bough fruit enough.'

And then wherever they passed they got cakes and ale. There war holy beer, made from church water caught in a butt from the roof, and that war supposed to be the best—'the life of the season,' folks called it then.' And if the lads got a touch too merry, folk knew what to do—they looked the other way. Rough play, rough pleasure; but they war men then."

As the old man ceased talking, I remembered having read in some old book on "Strange Customs" an account of "Apple Blow Youling," as it was called in the West. The rite was probably a survival of an old

heathen custom. It is supposed that it arose from a Roman practice of giving thanks to Æolus, the god of the winds, and that this pious invocation was instituted by them soon after their conquest of Britain. Anyway, the rite became popular, and long survived the occupation of the Romans; and in some places, apple youling, or howling, went on through the early part of the nineteenth century. There was a pause, and then old Timothy began to talk about the difficulty of inducing village maids to go into domestic service.

"They all thinks themselves born ladies now," he said sourly. "There's my cousin Polly Makin's granddaughter, a fine strapping lass to look at, but her went off last week to Birmingham. Dull, 'er said, it be here. What does her mean," asked the old man, in a tone of righteous wrath, "by finding it dull in her native town? When folks found it dull in their native place, when I war a lad, we called 'em stoopid; now they calls 'em larned and too good. Now 'tis all roar and express train. But her'll creep back some day, will Polly— young Polly, and be glad and thankful to find a place to lie her head in. They be all for pleasurin' now, expeditions and excursions, running everywhere with no eyes, that's what I call their modern games."

"But in old days, if I had wanted a housemaid or a scullery-maid, what should I have done?" I asked, bringing back my old friend to his subject.

"In old days," replied Timothy, "there warn't no manner of difficulty in the matter. The men and the maids used to stand in their native places on hire, which was a decent, open custom. At Christmas, there war the Gawby Market in the North; at Whitchurch there war the Rag Fair, as they called it; and at Shrewsbury, during fair time, all the farmers and their wives used to

go in to engage a maid or a man. At Much Wenlock, I've heard hirin' day was 12th of May; at Church Stretton it used to be on the 14th. At Market Drayton, I've often, in the forties and fifties, seen the carters stand forth, whips in hand, so that all might know their trade, and cry out, 'A driver, a driver, good with a team,' and such-like. Then the lasses wud stand with broom, or milk-pails and make known their callings, and the missuses and the masters would look round and engage who they had a mind to; and they cud mostly all scrub and clean, milk and churn, brew and bake in those days, for they couldn't read nor write, so their hearts were set on housewifely jobs. But now the maids know nought. It is all eddication, all readin' and writin', and they mostly can do nothing with a broom, or a brush. Readin' isn't often much good to 'em what works. Now servant wenches talk of getting engaged; hirin' war the word in the old time. When they war got in the old time, it war for a year, and not a penny did most of 'em get till the year had slipped away."

"Wasn't that rather hard?" I asked.

"The lads and lasses of the old days," answered Timothy, not without a certain dignity, "took the rough with the smooth. Folks then didn't all spec' to find roast larks dissolved in their mouths when they opened them, any more than to pull roses at Yuletide. Hard work and plenty of it, small pay and long service, that war their lot—the lot of the lads I knew by name. Times war harder than they be now, but Shropshire war a better, more manly place than it be now. Now there's no hirin'. The maids go off to registry offices in back streets. Palaver, dress, and flummery, that's what service be now. They writes up, and off they goes to London, Wolverhampton, or Birmingham. Not much

but paper and stamps now in service. A deal of dislikes and not an honest peck of work in the whole year—that's what folks call progress now."

Then we passed on to other subjects. "Is the world better, Timothy," I asked, "for the abolition of the stocks, and pillory? Surely the punishments of the old world were very brutal."

But my old friend would not allow this.

"Rough sinners need rough measures," he said. "The stick, when used properly, be a right good medicine, and when the stick bain't enough, take the lash. They cannot rule, as be afraid of tears.

"In old Shropshire the law crushed offence. At Newport the stocks were up till late years, and I mind me 'tishn't more than half a century ago that they were used at Wenlock. They had made a new one, it seems the last, and put it on wheels, so that it might run like a Lord Mayor's coach, they said. But to the last man, Snailey, as they put in, 'twas no punishment, for his friends they handed him up beer the whole way, and he came out drunk as a lord. I've never seen 'em whipped, but grandam did many's the time," continued old Timothy. "One of the posts of the Guildhall made the whippin'-post in the old times. And grandam often told me how she seed 'em herself whipped from the dungeon below the Guildhall to the White Hart Inn, and so round the town.

"When the job was over," pursued old Timothy, "they washed the stripes with salt and water. Old Sally Shake-the-Pail, as they called her, wud come round with salt and water, and sponge their backs. They used, I've heard, some of 'em, to scream fit to leave their skins behind; whilst others, grandam used to say, would never speak, lay on the lash as they

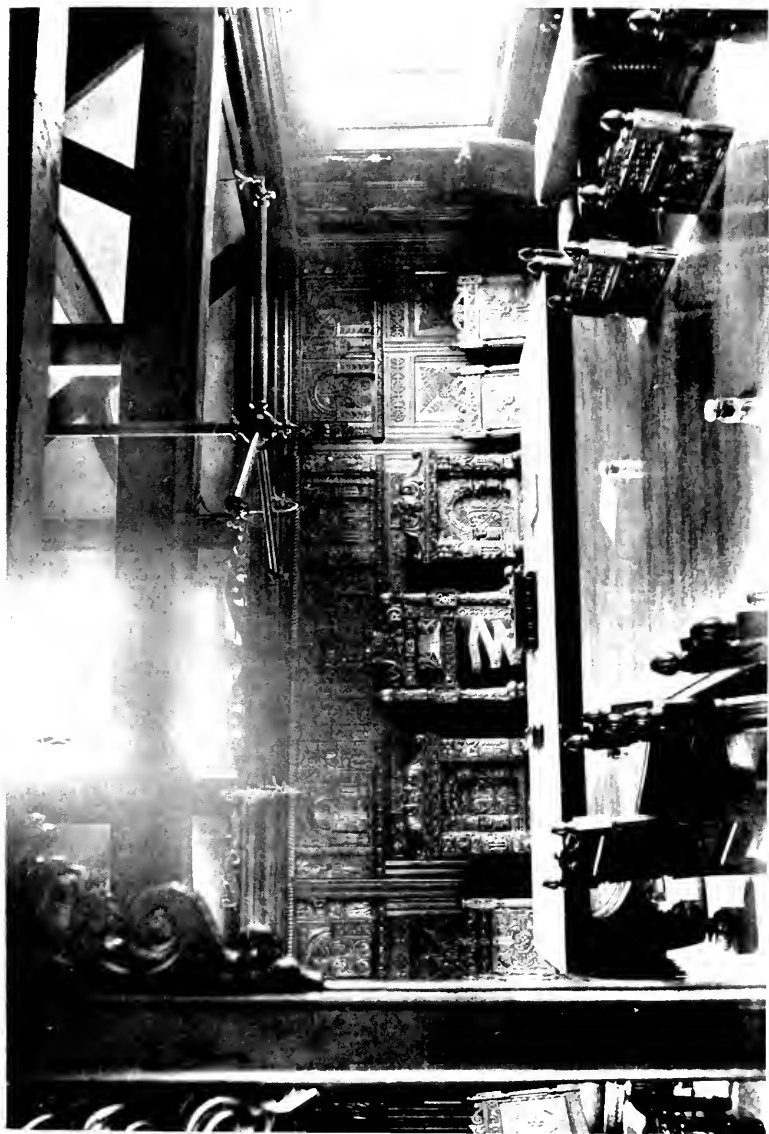


Photo by Firth.

THE OLD COLLEGE.



would, and walk round the town smilin', so braced up war they, to appear as if they didn't mind a farthin' piece.

"The Judgments, as they war called," continued my informant, "took place on market days. Then it war as they put a bridle on the scolds.

"Lor!" chuckled old Timothy, "'tis a scurvy pity as they can't clap 'em on now. There's many a wench as would be the better for it. There be Rachel Hodgkis, own cousin to Young Polly, and Mary Ann James, my great-nevy's wife, as 'twould do pounds of good to. But things are changed now, and 'tis all the women folks as have got the upper hand, and any pelrollick may grin, flount, jeer, and abuse as much as it plaizes her now. But in the old times it war different—different altogether."

Then old Timothy went on to say, "Many's the time as I've seen Judy Cookson in a bridle. Her war a terrible sight in one. Her wud scream and yell till her mouth fair ran with blood. Judy, folks said, cud abuse against any—in fact," old Timothy said, with local pride, "I think her cud have given points to many in Shrewsbury. Her war that free with her tongue, and bountiful of splitters.

"Besides these old judgments," said Timothy, "I've seen many strange things—sale of wives, and such-like trifles. Did yer ever hear, marm, the story of how Seth Yates sold his wife?" There was a pause, then Timothy drew breath and began afresh. "It must have been seventy years and odd," he declared, "but I mind it all as if war yesterday. A bit of a showery day, rain on and off, but sunshine between whiles.

"Yates, the husband, he lived at Brocton, and he and his missus couldn't git on nohow. They fought,

they scratched, and scrabbled like two tom-cats that had met on the roof. Mattie, they said, would screech and nag, and then Seth wud take up a stick and lay it on sharp. This went on for weeks, till the neighbours said there was no peace, and that they cud bear it no longer. The hurly-burly and rampage war that disgraceful.

“So Mattie thought matters over. She had a Yorkshire cousin at the hall, came from Barnsley, or some such outlandish place, her said, and her thought out, by her advice, how her cud carry out a separation with her man. ‘Getting shunt,’ Venus, her cousin, named it; for it appears in Yorkshire yer can sell yer wife, same as yer dog, if yer’ve got a mind, and even the bishops there say ’tis a handy practice. So Mattie said what can be done in Yorkshire can be done in Shropshire, for ’tis the same king as rules over the land.

“Seth he spoke up for a private sale; but Mattie said, ‘I war married in public, and I’ll be sold in public,’ for her war fearful of the law, seeing what back-handers the law can give, when they mightn’t reasonably be expected. And so they settled as all should be done fair and square, and above board on market day. Then for once folks said the pair they agreed.”

“Was the sale effected?” I asked.

“Simple and straightforward, same as pigs in a pen,” replied old Timothy. “The missus, her came into the market, dressed in her Sunday best, in a trim cotton, and wearin’ a new and stylish tippet, with fine ends of primrose ribbon, and round her neck her gude man had put a halter.

“When Yates got to Wenlock market, he turned

shy and silly. 'Let be, missus,' he said to his wife, 'I'll treat thee fair, if thee'll keep a civil tongue.' But her turned round savage like, like a hen when a terrier pup will meddle with her clutch of chickens, and her flapped her apurn slap in his face. 'I've come in to be sold,' her said, 'and I wull be sold if there's justice in England according to civilized customs.' And them as was standing by roared with laughter, and Tom Whinnall, a cheap Jack, turned to Seth and he cried out, "Let her be. A man never did wisely yet what kept a woman 'gainst her will. A woman what won't settle, be as mad as a tup in a halter.' So Seth he got shamed like, and he called out, 'Have it thy own way.' And her cried out furious, 'I'd rather go down the river like Jimmy Glover's cat, than bide with thee.' Then she got up in an empty cart, and Tom Whinnall he put her up for auction. Her fetched half a crown and a pot of beer."

"And what happened afterwards?"

"Oh, nothing much," replied Master Theobalds. "Anyway, Mattie had nothing to complain of. David Richards bought her, a great strapping fellow, that worked for the farmer at the Abbey, afore they turned it back into a mansion. Folks said that Mattie showed off first night, but David he just looked at her, and she minded him from the beginning. The neighbours never heard a sound. He war masterful war David, and he looked blacker than night when he had a mind, which, I take it, is the right way with such as Mattie, for sure enough the two lived happy as Wreken doves in the Bull Ring till Mattie died."

"Were there any penances in your time, Timothy?" I asked.

Timothy scratched his head and looked puzzled,

and at last answered, "I never seed any, but I've heard of 'em. Betty Beaman was the last as I've heard tell of. She had, it seems, to appear before all the people in a white sheet. Her felt it war cruel hard, I've heard grandam say. One day a neighbour told, of how years afterwards, her stood by the pump and told a friend that her had never got over that job. Her felt the misery of it even then. And her hoped some good soul would help the Lord to disremember, if so be she ever got to paradise."

Old Timothy stopped talking. "I must get back to my cup of tea," he said simply.

I put in his hand a little coin. "This will fill your pipe," I said.

"There's nought like backy," he answered. "'Tis meat and drink, and makes yer forget." Then leaning heavily on his stick, the old man got up.

I saw him walk past the old watch-tower of the monks, and stop at his old black and white timber house in the Bull Ring. As he pattered along, the brilliant sunshine struck upon his smock, and lighted up the elaborately embroidered yoke.

What a changed world it is, I said to myself. How completely one seems to hear the voice of the Middle Ages in listening to old Timothy's tales. Scolds, bridles, whipping-posts, penances, and stocks. As I mused, the sound of all others that belongs essentially to modern England reached me. Within a few hundred yards away I heard an engine puffing up and down.

Truly, in this country of ours, the old and the new are very close. I stood up on the base of a broken column, heard the guard's whistle, and saw engine and train go off into the far country. Whilst I was thus engaged, Bess ran up.

“Have you done?” she asked. “When you and old Timothy get together, he tells you a pack of rubbish, Nan says.”

That evening, in the twilight, I walked round the bee garden. Mouse lay outside by the wrought-iron gates and watched me. How delicious it is, the first fulfilment of everything in the glory of early June. My white Martagon lilies were covered with lovely little wax-like bells. The English crimson peony blossoms were all out, whilst their Chinese sisters had great knobby buds which would open shortly, and their bronze-tinted foliage was a beautiful ornament to the garden. My hybrid perpetual roses were not yet in flower, for Shropshire is a cold county compared to Sussex or Surrey; but the glory was on the wing, and would come to us surely, if a little later than in the south of England. My single rose bushes were all rich with buds. How lovely Harrisoni would be shortly, I thought. And soon my hedge of Penzance briars would be a perfect barrier of sweetness, I mused. Then I looked below, and saw that my beautiful columbines were nearly all in full perfection. How delicate they were in colouring, in their soft grey, topaz pinks, and die-away lavenders and ambers. They recalled shades of opal seen through flame and sunlight, and fading skies after glorious sunsets. Last summer I got a packet of Veitch's hybrids, and this year I have been amazed at their beauty.

Then I passed on to my lupines. They were all in bud, white, blue, and purple, a great joy to the bees. A little further off were great clumps of Oriental poppies, neatly and fully staked by Burbidge. Tied so that they could flower to their heart's content and in full enjoyment of air and sunlight; not tied up in faggots, such as the ordinary gardener delights in.

I fondly wandered round and round. How good it was to be out in the opening splendour of June, and to look at everything to one's heart's content.

There was no sound of voices. Burbidge and his men had left the garden for the night, only the notes of blackbird and thrush reached me softly from the bushes beyond. To-night they, too, seemed almost dazed, with the glory of summer and were singing below their breath, as if worn out with the beauty of nature.

At last I tore myself away from the red-walled garden, and went and looked at the tubs full of geraniums and at the beds on the east side. How cool and happy they looked, and how grateful for the bountiful moisture they had received from hose and water-can. Drops glistened faintly on the stems, and the plants seemed to be drinking in the water with avidity. How good it was, accomplished work, and how sweet the stillness of a summer evening.

I stole back into the house and looked on the little table for the letters that had come by the second post. I found one from Mrs. Stanley. "I think," she wrote "after all, that you and Bess have the best of it. For poor little Hals ever since he has been here has been poorly and ailing. Oh! why cannot children be well in London?"

I asked Bess the question, for she stood by me, about to say "good night" before going off to the little white cot upstairs.

"Why should poor children?" she answered, with a pout. "London is so dull."

I kissed my little maid and said, "Then we must get Hals down here."

At this Bess clapped her hands. "Of course we

must," she cried. "If people want to be happy, they should live at Wenlock."

I sat down that evening and asked Mrs. Stanley to send her little boy down to us. "The country just now is so sweet and fresh that it must do him good," I wrote. "We will take the greatest care of him; and here he has all the world to play in." The next morning I told Bess what I had done.

"Yes," repeated Bess, gravely, "all the world to play in, and that is what a poor boy can never have in London. There is no place there, excepting for motors and policemen."

All through the night sweet summer rain fell. How delightful a morning is after such rain. How happy every plant and leaf looked, how greedily all seemed to have drunk their fill—trees, shrubs, grass, and flowers. What an aspect of deep refreshment everything had, as if an elixir of life had been poured into the veins of every tree and herb.

Speckled thrushes hopped about and caught earth-worms as they peered up through the lawns. On the stone steps leading up to the red-walled garden lay the broken remains of many dusky shells of the monks' snails, or as the children call them here, "snail housen." Beside these lay also broken fragments of beautiful yellow, and pale pink ones. A little later I walked into the garden to look at my great bed of roses. What a wonderful change one night of rain had made! How the shoots had lengthened, how "the blows," as Burbidge calls them, had expanded. What a difference in the fat buds! The aphides, which seemed such a pest a week before, had vanished, while the leaves were refreshed and glittered with dew-drops.

Henricus Stephanus' old lines came back to me—

“The rose, is the care and the love of the spring,
The rose is the pleasure of th' heavenly Pow'rs;
The boy of fair Venus, Cyther's darling,
Doth wrap his head round with garlands of rose
When to the dance of the graces he goes.”

Amongst my beautiful modern roses, I noted that La France was opening two delicious buds. What a beautiful rose it is; and what an exquisite perfume it possesses! Then I found a gorgeous Fisher Holmes, a General Jacqueminot, and a Captain Christy. All these had been born, as Bess calls it, in the night. Besides these modern joys, I paused to notice my old-world friends. I could not pass by without casting a glance upon the loves of Gerard and Parkinson. The pimpernel rose, little Scotch briars of different sorts, the little single rose without thorns, the damask, the yellow cabbage, and the splendid vermilion, the musk, the single cinnamon and the great Holland, all these have their places in different parts of my garden.

Parkinson tells us how at Longleete in his time people said that a rose tree then bore white roses on one side, and red on the other; but the old writer looked upon this as a fable, and declared, “This may be as true as the old story that a white hen visited Livia Augusta with a sprig of bays, and foretold, Augusta believed, by so doing empire to Augusta's posterity, and extinction to the race when the brood of the hen failed.” Be this as it may, I have a standard rose with a Gloire de Dijon and a General Jacqueminot budded on the same tree. Burbidge was much pleased with the combination of colours and called it Christian and Heathen—names, I fancy, first bestowed by his old wife Hester.

Before I left the red-walled garden, I stopped before

a bush of rosemary. I pinched a leaf and picked a little spray on which were some minute blossoms just coming into flower. Farmers' wives of Shropshire use the leaves for flavouring their lard, and a bush or two is to be found in every farmhouse border.

I remembered the great bushes of this plant that I saw in the Riviera above Mentone, and near the Italian frontier on the road to Bordighera. I recalled Evelyn's affection for this fragrant plant, and I recollected what he tells us in his delightful diary, after a night at Loumas in 1644, about this delightful aromatic shrub.

After passing the Durance, he wrote, "We came upon a tract of country covered with rosemary, lavender, lentiscs and the like sweet shrubs, for many miles together, which to me was very pleasant."

Yes, I said to myself, the scent is very pleasant, health and sweetness combined, in which is nothing cloying or sickly. I laughed for the old Shropshire proverb came back to me of "Where the grey mare is stalled, rosemary grows apace." I have heard it said that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was the fashion to put rosemary on and round the corpses of the old. "Vors for maids, rosemary and lavender for those as die old in God," an old cottager once said to me; and the same old body told me that in her mother's time "'twas thought a mark of respect to put a bunch of sweet-smelling herbs round a dear dead face, such as the sage tree, a sprig of thyme, a bunch of lavender, or a branch of rosemary." What a pretty offering such must have been! One can imagine dim figures in the gloaming going up to the chamber of death some summer evening—old friends and gossips in smocks, or with countryside chintz bonnets, and each guest placing a spray of some sweet herb, as a tribute of affection, by

the dear dead face that would never wake up, or speak to them again.

A few steps from the rosemary bush is my plant of *fraxinella*. Its stalk glistened with sweet stickiness. It was of the white variety, far more beautiful than the one generally known as the pink.

Years ago in an old Hampshire garden I loved as a child, I was taken out by my father's old gardener with my sister to see his "Burning Bush." I recollected, as if it had been only yesterday, that as little girls we had been allowed to sit up once till nine, to see the bush set on fire. I thought then this harmless bonfire the most wonderful and mystic thing that I had ever seen. We went out with our old nurse and saw it lighted at a distance, our old nurse holding both our hands. How wonderful it seemed in the stillness of the summer's evening, with no sound but the distant singing of the birds. I remember how the old gardener, who had lived with father, grandfather and great-uncle, told us the story of the burning bush and bade us read our Bibles, and how we believed for years afterwards that we two had seen a miracle and had stood on holy ground that summer night.

For many years I lost sight of the *fraxinella* as a border plant. The good old gardener of my old home died, and the burning bush was dug up, I heard, under an evil successor, and thrown on the midgeon heap, and alone the memory of the mystic plant and the still summer's evening remained with me.

But after my marriage, I remembered spending a June in France, and one day in the first week in June I saw the altar of the cathedral at Laon decked with great sprays of lovely white *fraxinella*. The scent was intense—heavier than the heaviest incense. I am

sensitive to the perfume of flowers, and therefore could not remain long in the edifice, but the odour brought back the memory of the burning bush of my childhood, and I went off to a florist in the market-place and bought two packets of seeds for my Shropshire home. One was a packet of the pink variety, and the other was of the white. When I returned to the Abbey the seeds were sown by Burbidge, but, to quote the old man, "they was as shy of coming up as blows be in snow." We waited and we waited for any sign of life.

All through the late summer and autumn there was no symptom of vegetation. The seeds, which were like little black shot, remained dormant. For many months there was no change.

At last Burbidge lost all patience. "Put they," and he pointed to the boxes in which the *fraxinella* seeds were sown, "put they on the midgeon heap, and let the foreigners get their deserts."

Happily I stood by when this order was given, and pleaded that they should be left a little longer. One chilly day in February, when the only sign of the return of life seemed the gilding of the willows, I peered into the frame, and I saw, as gardeners say, "my seeds on the move," and in due time my old gardener reared me some half-dozen plants. After some abuse, Burbidge has taken kindly to the "foreigners," and now graciously allows "that yer might do worse than grow *fraxinella* in a garden."

I leant over and smelt the long white spikes, and thought of the old plant in the Hampshire garden. I noticed that the sticky stem was a perfect fly-trap, and that hundreds of little insects were caught and drowned in it like in the leaves of the sun-dew on Scotch moors. It is this sticky fluid, I am told, that

burns without injuring the plant, when set on fire on a summer's night. Every part of the *fraxinella* is redolent of fragrance—leaf, stalk, and petals—later, even the husk of the seed pod. All are exquisitely perfumed; and the husks, if gathered, will retain their sweetness for long months together.

A little further off, I stood before my clumps of pinks. I have a great many sorts, and all are deliciously sweet—the sweetest of all flowers I have heard them called.

In Chaucer's time it was the fashion, it seems, to talk of the "*parwenke of prowess*;" in Sir Philip Sidney's age, writers spoke of "*the pink of courtesy*." We no longer compare a high and noble spirit to a flower. Do we love flowers less?

I walked up and down before my lines of pinks and wondered. I have the lovely Amoor pink, the pretty Maiden, the chocolate brown and white, the delicate little Cheddar, peeping up between stones and rocks, and a lovely little Norwegian variety that a friend brought me back from a fishing-lodge. My little Scandinavian friend has a low habit of growth, in fact, only rears its pink head a few inches from the soil, but its blossoms are of a radiant rose, and deliciously sweet.

Later in the day I went down a quiet path in the kitchen garden, that faces east. There were no bright colours there, only sober-tinted old-world herbs. Every monastic garden in the days of the Plantagenets had its *herbularis*, or physic garden.

Here there were little square beds of rosemary, of rue, fennel, linseed, rye, hemp, thyme, woodruff, camomile, mallow, clove, and basil. Of the clove basil Parkinson wrote, that "it was a restorative for a

weak heart, and was known to cast out melancholy and sadness."

Burbidge still cuts and dries these herbs, and village folks and cottagers from the neighbourhood come for others.

"Fennel tea," he tells me, "is good to purify the blood, mallow is excellent for rheumatism, whilst thyme, pounded fine, serves in cases of colic." Boiled lily bulbs for healing wounds, I am told, are also good. Then, in the corner against the wall, there is a patch of the old single violet, which I have heard is very soothing for inflammation, and now often advocated for curing cancer. Also a clump of borage, which Gerard declares, "comforteth the heart, purgeth melancholy, and quieteth the phrantick." A few steps away I saw a patch of crane's-bill, the old geranium of the Middle Ages, which the same writer recommended to be prepared with red snails and to be taken internally.

Besides these, nestling against the wall, I noted a plant of golden mouse-ear just coming into blossom. Here they call it "grin the collar." It is a wild plant which the Elizabethan herbalist speaks of with affection, and which he says he found growing in dame Bridget Kingsmill's ground, on distant downs, "not far from Newberry."

I saw also bursting into blossom roots of the old single peony. It was of the sort that I have been told must be gathered in the night, or else the ill-fated gatherer may be struck blind.

Some years ago, I remembered once asking for a blossom of this sort in a cottage garden to copy in my embroidery. But the old woman to whom the plant belonged would not hear of picking a flower.

"Best leave it—best leave it," she had said. I

thought her churlish for the moment, and then thought no more about it; but the same evening, whilst we were at dinner, a blossom of the single peony was brought in to me on a salver, and I was told that little Betty, old widow Hodgkis's granddaughter, had run up from below the Edge "to pleasure me."

Granny, said the child, had told her that "you're welcome to it, and that, bein' as it is there, was no ill-luck."

On being pressed to explain, the child had answered, "Us dursn't pick that blow early, but granny says, picked at night, peonies be as safe as Job Orton in his shop, but in noontime 'tis only suckin' gulleys as wud pick 'em." For some moments I could not get the reason out of the little maid, but at last, when we were alone, she whispered to me. "'Tis along of the ecalls. If one war to see yer in the day, madder yer'd be than a tup at Bridgenorth fair, and blind, behappen."

There is also in Shropshire a lingering belief that the seed of the single peony has magic powers to soothe and quiet women. A young widow, who had lost her husband in an accident connected with the blasting of the lime rock, obtained sleep by drinking a tea made from the seeds, I was assured.

"My Jane," her mother said, "couldn't sleep no-how before. It was rocks, and falls in darkness, and screams all the time with her, let her do what she would. Her got fair tired of physic, nothing the doctor gave her seemed to bring peace, or to padlock her tongue. Then came Jill Shore," I was told, "as lives halfway up the heights of Tickwood. A witch some counted her, and her made my Jane lie down, and her charmed her with verses and made her drink a draught of peonina seed. And Jane her fell asleep, like a lamb

beside its dam, and her slept, and slept, and woke up reasonable and quiet, and for all she was mortal sad, she was a decent soul again, and gave up screeching and tearing out her hair, and screaming out things not fit for a decent body to say."

Then there was, at the end of the garden, a plant of goat's rue, and a patch of mustard seed. An old writer declared that mustard would take away the black and blue marks that come from bruises. How that may be, I know not, but later on we shall take up the crop, root and blossom, and dig in the plants as manure into the fresh ground where we hope to grow our tulips for next year. It is the best manure that can be given to tulips, and an old secret amongst the tulip growers of past centuries. Just beyond the crop of mustard I saw a root of wild clary. In some of the old herbals this plant was accounted an excellent remedy for weak eyes, and Gerard tells us that it was a common practice in his day to put the seeds into poor folks' eyes, to cure disease.

Just by the door that led into the paddock, there was a plant of woodruff. Very delicate and sweet is the scent of this little flower. It grows in great patches under the hazel trees of the Edge Wood. Formerly woodruff was used in church decoration, and was deftly woven into many garlands. In the north of Europe woodruff is still used as a herb to flavour drinks. I never heard of this being done in England, but in Shropshire it is often culled in the farmhouses to put in muslin bags, in the place of lavender. It has a sweet scent, which remains with letters and kerchiefs like a memory of the past.

Then there was, I saw, a plant of wormwood, the plant from which absinthe is distilled. In the sixteenth

and seventeenth century the leaves of this plant were chopped up for flavouring, and it was thought an excellent seasoning to venison. By the wormwood there was a line of camomile. A little later in the summer the plants will be covered with little white star-like blossoms. Burbidge will cut stalks and flowers and his wife will dry them in the sun, and give them away to the parents of sick children. "My missus," the old man once said to me, "mostly does her kindnesses by nastiness. Her will," he added, "fair poison a body to keep her alive."

But though Burbidge allows himself the privilege of a free tongue as regards his wife's remedies, he permits no criticism elsewhere. On one occasion one of "his boys" objected to a gigantic draught of ales-hoof and mallow, flavoured with camomile. "What dost thee stand there for, loselling?" was the vigorous rebuke I heard addressed by my old friend, as the victim hesitated to drink down at a gulp, a bumper of a frothy brown fluid. "I tell thee, Roderick, if it fair blows off thy stomach, it will make a new man of thee." "I canna," feebly protested Burbidge's man. But he had to; for as my old gardener said, with a purple face of wrath, "I and my missus don't make physic for folks to chuck abroad, and a man that works under, needs must drink under." Whatever the immediate effect of the awful beverage was, I cannot say, but this I do know, Roderick did not die; he even looked as usual a week later.

Few gardeners now have their herb plots, but through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries ladies and their waiting-women made household medicines, and administered these themselves to the villagers, and to the members of their households.

Suddenly, whilst I was looking at my herbs and thinking of how they were used in earlier days, the garden door was thrown abruptly open and Bess danced in before me.

"What a time you have been away!" she cried. "I can't run about, and only look at flowers or watch idle birds. Hals is coming, that is what I have to think of."

I went into the house after luncheon, my chair and table were carried out, and I sat and embroidered. This time I worked a cherubim's face, who possessed long locks and had dark-blue eyes.

"I am going to give him chestnut hair," I said; and I looked out six different shades of reddish-brown to produce the desired effect.

"He ought to be pretty," said Bess, who had seated herself by me. "Good children should be beautiful."

"Why?" I asked.

"Why?" repeated Bess. "Why, because God could never do with ugly little squinting things up there. He wouldn't want boys that had crooked noses and red warty hands, and ugly eyes that didn't look straight."

"But suppose, Bess, the good children," I urged, to see what Bess would say, "had crooked noses, red warty hands, and squinting eyes, what must be done then?"

"Oh, mamsie, you don't understand heaven," said Bess, loftily, "but I and Prince Charming do," and she hugged her puppy. "We do. We know that God can't have ugly boys in His garden, or what would the poor girl angels do? I know what heaven is like—beautiful, beautiful," and my little maid stood panting with excitement before me. "All the flowers all out, and all the fruit quite ripe, and you may pick what you

like, and no cross Nanas ever make you wash, or go to bed until you're quite, quite tired."

"Have you ever been there?" I asked, smiling at my little girl's enthusiasm.

"Once," said Bess. "Nana said I was asleep, but I know better. The snow was on the ground, deep, deep, but I wasn't frightened, for when I looked out—and I got out of bed all myself, when Nana was at supper—I saw the stars, and I knew the angels were close to me; and when I crept back to bed I said, 'God make me good,' and I didn't sleep, but I went to heaven, and that's better than a picnic on the Edge, or making toffee with Mrs. Langdale. So you see I know there are no ugly people in heaven, because, mamsie, I've been there."

"But in your philosophy, Bess," I answered, "what happens to poor people, sick people, old people, all the people who have worked for God and done the work of His kingdom here?"

"Oh, God," said Bess, softly, "God gives them all prizes. When you give children prizes at the school, they don't get nothing more, but when God gives one prize they get everything."

"Everything?" I asked.

"Yes," said Bess, "dolls, cakes, pups. And then they play, and are always young, and they never have rheumatics, not even colds or coughs."

I kissed my little girl and told her to dream of heaven again.

A minute or two later, and Bess was off chasing a butterfly.

"Mama," she said after a long chase, when she returned to me with a scarlet face and dripping temples, "do you know that Mrs. Burbidge's nephew, Frank



Photo by Mr. W. Golling.

THE ORATORY.



Crossley, has brought her back a beautiful glass case, and it's full of butterflies—real butterflies. There's a beautiful blue one—all blue, and a red one, and a yellow one, like the gorse you told me not to pick because it was so prickly, and one green, like the Edge Wood when you look below and can't see a cornfield, and can only hear flies buzzing. And do you know Frank caught them all himself, and he stuck a pin into each to keep them tight, and spread their wings as if they were flying; but they can't really fly for they've always got to stay in his box." Then, after a gasp, my little maid put her hand in mine, "Mama, may I have a net and a box, and some pins, for I should like to have what Burbidge calls a 'collection'?"

"But you won't like to hurt butterflies, Bess?" I said. "Just think how horrid it would be to run pins through them and to pin down their beautiful wings in boxes."

"Well," said Bess, "I suppose I shouldn't like that at first, but Frank doesn't mind. I'm not an ignorant little insect," said Bess, loftily, "and you won't make me believe, mamsie, that stupid little insects can feel like girls or boys."

I did not argue, for I am aware that the best wisdom of the child comes sometimes from the silence of the parent, rather than from the speech; but I felt sure my words would come back later to Bess, and that when she had had time for reflection, her better nature would make her give up the wish to have a collection of butterflies. Whilst we thus sat on, Nana swooped down and captured Bess.

"I must wash your face and hands, miss, before going to the station," she said tartly, and at the same time informed me that a poor woman was waiting

outside in the monk's passage, who wished to speak to me. "I can't make head nor tail of what she wants," said Nana, sourly.

"A pack of rubbish and not a grain of sense, that's what we often feel about our neighbours' sayings and doings," I answered. "But ask her to come and see me."

Mrs. Milner disappeared, and in a few moments reappeared, followed by a little brown, undersized woman, with a mahogany skin, and wrinkled like a walnut. Mrs. Eccles was a little hunchback, and had come from the Dingle to see me. She walked a bit lamely, and carried a stick. Mouse gave a growl, and Prince Charming, who had rolled himself up on the edge of my skirt, tumbled up with a snort, and a gruffle. I begged the poor woman not to be afraid, told her to sit on a bench close by, and asked her mission.

"'Tisn't no flannel, no, nor no dinners neither, not even a packet of tea," she answered. For a moment Nana returned to fetch a ribbon or a tie—some lost possession of Bess's. On seeing her Mrs. Eccles remained silent, for, as she whispered, "'twas a private matter." Then when Nana had disappeared, her courage returned, and she blurted out, "I knows as yer have one, for all Mr. Burbidge says. There always was one—one out alongside of the walled garden."

I felt puzzled, but nodded and begged my old friend to tell me what it was she had come for. But a direct answer is not often to be got from the poor, you must wait for an answer, as a dear old clergyman once said to me, "as you must wait for flowers in an English spring." So I threaded my needle with a brilliant brown, and Mrs. Eccles's speech bubbled on, like a brook in February.

"It be in this way, for I know this place, same as the inside of my own kitchen," she said. "Didn't I work here fifty years ago, in the old days? I knowed this place," she said, looking round, "afore it war a haunt of the gentry, when it was farmer folk as lived here, and when I war a servin' wench, when I scrubbed, and cleaned, plucked geese at Yule-tide, and helped the missus in making mince-meat, and in making butter for the market. I know'd it then, and I knows it now."

I tried to stem the old dame's eloquence, for the time I had at her disposal was limited; but my little old guest was voluble, and I had to sit quiet to learn her mission. At last light pierced through her discourse, and I discovered that she had come down for a leaf, or a sprig, of some plant.

"You must come round and show me what it is you want," I said at last; and I covered up my embroidery and prepared to take her to the herb plots in the kitchen garden, as the most likely spot to find out what she was in need of.

But halfway, Mrs. Eccles stopped dead, shook her head, and called out, "It never grow'd there, I be sure it never did. I know it does there," and she pointed back to the Abbey, "for I have a-know it afore yer was born, and, my dear, it war along top-side of the mound, at back of the red wall, where the missus used to grow her fever drinks, and where they put in cabbages for Christians and cows alike." As she spoke my funny old friend turned her back on the kitchen garden, and made for the quadrangle as hard as her old legs would take her. Mouse and I followed hot-foot behind. Suddenly Mrs. Eccles came to a dead stop at the foot of a green slope, on which the red wall was built,

and pointed with her black stick, at a green shrub above her.

"There her be," she cried triumphantly, "sure enough, same as a galenny's nest, snug and safe."

I scrambled up the bank, and Mouse followed with a bound. The old body was almost breathless for a minute, but went on pointing like a pointer at the shrub.

"What is it for?" I asked. The shrub in question was a bay tree, and in a severe winter in the nineties, had almost died, but last spring it revived somewhat, and sent out a few weakly branches this summer.

"What does I want it for?" repeated Mrs. Eccles. "Why I wants it for salvation; to save my boy from the Lightning." Then she went on to tell me, with a burst of eloquence, about the Shropshire belief, to the effect that a spray of bay-leaf, or a feather of an eagle, if worn in a cap or hat, can preserve the wearer from lightning.

"The big hawk's feather, there's none as can get now," she said. "The railways and the holiday-makers have killed they, but they have left the bay trees."

Then I remembered having heard that Mrs. Eccles's husband, some forty odd years ago, had been killed whilst haymaking, struck by lightning. "'Twas the death of Job, his fork," an old man had once told me. "The lightning came clean down, and struck him by the command of the Lord."

"If my gude man had had but a sprig, he might have been hearty now," broke from Mrs. Eccles; and she went on to tell me that her grandson, Joseph Holroyd, "war goin' to work for Farmer Church, and that she had come here, for I know'd as you'd provide."

I opened the little knife on my chain, and cut off a sprig and gave it to my old friend.

She bobbed low, and scuttled away. "Won't you have a cup of tea?" I called after her. But she shook her head, and cried out, "Nay, nay, I have my widdies (ducks) to feed;" and as I stood and looked, the little brown figure disappeared up the drive. When I went back to the east garden, I thought over my conversation with Mrs. Eccles, and I recollected having read somewhere, that the Romans believed that a phoenix's feather, if it could be obtained and worn in the bosom, would avert disaster; and a learned friend once told me that the Emperor Tiberius was much alarmed by thunder, and always wore a wreath of laurel round his neck if the weather was stormy, because he believed that laurels were never blasted by lightning. So I reflected that my old friend, bred amidst the wilds of Shropshire, held, after all, unconsciously an old pagan belief, of which the plume from the big hawk was only another version of the phoenix's feather, whilst the laurel and the bays sprang, likely enough, from the same legend. Whilst revolving the old beliefs of past empires in my mind, I was called back to the present by Bess rushing up to me, and calling out—

"Where have you been Mum, Mum? We shall be late, I know we shall be late. And if Hals didn't find some one to meet him, what would he say?"

"I'm sure I don't know," I said penitently.

"Nor me," retorted Bess, indignantly.

So without more ado, my daughter, Prince Charming and I walked up a golden field of glittering buttercups to the station. We waited on the platform. The train was late—when isn't the train late in the country?—

and Bess and I sat down on the long bench that faced the line.

Bess seemed lost in a brown study. "A penny for your thoughts, miss," I said.

"Mum," replied Bess, dreamily, "I am thinking and thinking——"

"Yes, dear?"

"What is the use of London?"

The subject is rather large, I urged. But Bess had the sharp, incisive intellect of a quick child, and stood firm to her opinion.

"I don't see," she said, "that noise, shows, and smart people make use. Why should poor children be taken to London? If the grown-ups want it, they had better go there by themselves."

"My dear little person," I said, "even the youngest of others must sometimes do disagreeable things, even in the twentieth century."

But this was a hard matter for an only child to understand, and Bess would have none of it.

At the same moment, we heard the noise and rattle of the approaching train, and our discussion broke off abruptly. A second later the train had stopped, and the guard alighted and opened a first-class compartment, and proceeded to lift out little Hals. Bess dashed up breathless. The children were too excited to embrace each other. They only rushed to each other, took each other's hands, and went on dangling them, and blushing like two rose buds. Whereupon so, Prince Charming fell with a yelp to the ground. Happily, I was by to pick up and console the poor little puppy. A quiet, nice-looking young woman came out, bearing in her arms a host of packages and rugs. In a minute or two Hals' luggage was collected, and we walked down across

the buttercup field to the old Abbey, whilst swallows flew overhead, and sunshine chased purple clouds across the sky.

"Fräulein is not here?" I heard Bess say to Hals.

"No," answered Hals.

"Then," whispered Bess, "I shall be able to pray to-night. For all God lives so far, I think He can understand a girl sometimes."

"That's handy," agreed Hals, shortly.

"Yes," answered Bess; "He knew what I wanted at Christmas all of His own accord, and now He has left out Fräulein, and He couldn't have done better, even if He had been papa."

To this, Hals made no answer, but both children danced with glee. Then followed tea, and two hours afterwards, bed.

When my little girl was in bed, I went up and found her, and said the last good-night. Her eyes shone like little stars, and she put her arms round my neck.

"Mum—Mum," she said, so I went quite close. "I thought," said my little maid, "when I had got Prince Charming, that I never could want anything else, but I do now want something bad—bad."

"Yes?" I answered.

"Is there nowhere," pursued my little girl, "where one can buy a brother? I want one so bad."

The children and I passed a happy week—a week of golden sunshine. Miss Weldon went off and spent the time with a cousin at Hereford, and I was left alone with lad and lass. We read, and talked, and played. There were no lessons, but I told them "lovely stories." Beautiful old legends, pretty tales from history, and I read aloud from Hans Andersen, and parts of Charles Kingsley's delicious "Water Babies."

"I think," said Bess one day as I closed the book, "that I love Tom best of all as a little sweep."

"Yes," said Hals, "for he was so game, running across the moor all by himself. When I am a man, I hope I shall never be afraid. I am sure my father never is." Then, after a pause, he added, "Some day I shall be a soldier, and fight the king's enemies."

"So shall I," said Bess.

But this Hals would not allow. "Girls cannot fight," he assured me, gravely. "They can only scratch. Besides, boys cannot fight girls, so it wouldn't be fair."

"Then I must fight girls," said Bess, sadly; "but I'm afraid that wouldn't be much fun, for girls mostly pinch, and run away."

The weather was beautiful during Hals' stay with us. The Shropshire fields and woods seemed all under an enchanter's wand. Blue mist lay on the Wrekin and on the Clee. Sunshine glowed all the day, and in the evening, glorious sunsets, and tranquil twilights. After tea, we sometimes took Jill, the little pony, and the children rode one behind the other along the lanes. All the hedges were redolent with honeysuckle, and great pink sprays of the most exquisitely lovely of all flowers, the wild dog-rose, curled over branch and stem; whilst larks sang over green seas of rippling wheat, which moved in broad waves over stormless, summer seas.

Far away I showed the children one evening the Brown Clee, the land of witches and romance to Shropshire youth. No rain fell, no tempests gathered. It was June, and the perfection of June weather. Sheets of buttercups glistened in the meadows, moon-daisies nodded in the upland grasses, and over disused lime-kilns blew beds of rosy thyme and rock-roses, whilst here and there, on the outskirts of forest lands, we

found the sweetest of all wild flowers—pale butterfly orchises, with their strange sweet perfume, which, as Bess said, made you long to live, only in afternoons. Thady one day joined us in one of our expeditions. He got up from a bush suddenly as we were passing—bare-legged, jovial, courteous, as only an Irish lad can be.

“The ‘top of the morning,’ mam,” he cried, and his face lit up with a simultaneous smile.

“It is afternoon,” I laughed.

“Whatever the hour or the season, ’tis only well I wish yer,” he replied, with the spontaneous politeness of the Celt.

“Have you anything pretty to show us?” I asked.

“Yes,” repeated Bess, “show us something pretty.”

“Well,” said Thady, looking down, “it’s getting late, I’m thinking, for seeing sights; most that’s young is getting fledged. But I know a field where there’s a lot of little leverets, soft as down, pretty as kittens.”

So we followed on. I led Jill, with Bess riding on a boy’s saddle, and Hals followed behind. We passed a wild, rough field, with the steep pitch of the Edge Wood on one side, and the view of a great stretch of country up to Shrewsbury, and beyond. To the west we saw Caer Caradoc and the Long-mynd sleeping in purple haze. Then we passed through a hunting wicket, and went into another rough-and-tumble field, with rampant thistles, full of old disused lime-kilns, and sheep-nipt bushes of thorns.

“What lovely places to play in!” cried Bess, enthusiastically. “Perhaps real gnomes and goblins live there, and if we stayed till the church-tower clock struck twelve, we might really see them in red caps. The sort, mamsie, that you and I know. Perhaps,”

she added, "then they might bring us gold. You know they do."

"Begorra!" cried Thady, indulgently, "if yer was to come here at midnight, yer couldn't count them for jostling, the leprechauns and such like gentry. They be plentiful as faiberries in Muster Burbidge's garden in August."

At this Hals said gravely, "I should like to come and see them one night, although I have never heard my father speak of them. I don't think he knows many goblins at Westminster."

"Westminster," retorted Thady, magnificently, "is a poor place for meeting anything but common men and women."

Then we walked on in single file, for I had to guide the pony with care, for the pitches on each side of the path were steep and slippery. In one part of the field there was a large round clump of white dog roses, such as are often to be found in waste places, with brilliant yellow stamens and bronze-coloured stalks and buds.

"I think 'tis here as you'll find, missie, the little yellow fluffs at home," said Thady.

Evidently in the innermost recesses of the rose bush there was a fine scent of something very good to the canine mind, for Mouse pricked up her ears, sniffed boisterously, and began to move her tail like a fox-hound drawing a covert. Then with a great swirl and pounce, she darted right into the brake, bending and breaking all by her weight, and brought out in her mouth a little ball of fluff. The poor little creature screamed in terror, almost like a child.

I rushed forward. "Mouse, Mouse!" I cried, "drop it, drop it!"

Mouse looked at me reproachfully out of her topaz

eyes, held it, but allowed me to pass my fingers between her great jaws and to release the little captive. Great was my delight to find that poor little puss was quite unhurt, only very wet with my dog's saliva.

I sat down, and Thady lifted off Bess from the pony, and then the children flocked round to see the long-eared little creature I was holding in my arms.

"Isn't it pretty?" I said, and held up the little tawny ball of fluff. "Look what lovely brown eyes it has, and what tender shades of buff and fawn are in its long ears."

"Let us take him home," cried Bess, enthusiastically.

"But," I asked, "how about Tramp and Tartar? They would not be gentle like Mouse." And I added, "It was lucky that they did not come with us this afternoon. They would not only have caught the little leveret, they would have killed him, too."

Bess agreed. "They are very wicked for all their nice ways." And then she added dreamily, "I wonder if terriers ever go to heaven."

"Begorra! if it is the holy Mother that has a fancy for the breed, I'll be bound she gets them past St. Peter. 'Dade," said Thady, "if I was the saint, I'd never shut the door in a good bitch's face."

"Well," says Bess, after a little pause, "for all terriers kill things, they love us badly; and, besides, there may be rats in heaven."

"How about heaven, then, being quite a perfect place?" I asked, for I must plead guilty to a strong dislike to rats.

"Mum, Mum," answered Bess, impatiently, "you must leave the poor Lord a few rats, or what would his poor dogs do?"

I laughed and had no answer ready, for a child's wit

is generally the hardest to fight. The best being bred by simplicity and kindness of heart. A minute later I slipped back my little furry nursling into the rose-bush, and we threaded our way across the fields.

As we retraced our steps no bird sang, only the faint barking of a dog in some distant farm reached our ears, and away in the hollow came the far-off sound of distant church bells. We walked along grassy fields, down dim lanes, and beside the budding wheat.

Thady was to come down and get a slice of cake and a glass of milk. "With raisins, real raisins!" exclaimed Bess. The prospect of the feast opened his heart.

"Begorra, I'll tell you at last," he cried, with a sly chuckle, and he bubbled over with laughter. "You shall hear all about the job. Yer leddyship," continued Thady, "has taught me to hate the thieving of a poor bird's nest, same as the blessed Virgin has taught me to be a Christian."

I nodded in approbation, but did not quite understand; but then that, as Bess says, "never matters, if you're not found out." In a minute Thady went on—whilst I led both children, mounted on old Jill—and told me of an adventure of his.

"It was this ways," he said. "Two gentlemen last month came over from Manchester, and they put up at the Raven. I watched them come, out of the corner of my eye—and 'tis little," Thady added, "that escapes me at such times. So when they had been round the churchyard, and peered at the ruins, as is the habits of town-bred folks, I made so bold as to approach them. Indade, I had kept, ever since they left the hotel, remarkably near them. My mother watched me up the Bull Ring, for she knowed that I had a bit of somethin' up my sleeve, and as I passed, lookin' as dacent as a lad that had just

been bishopped, she whispered, 'Ye spalpeen, what be yer tricks?' But I shook her off, as a lad of spirit should, for when yer minded to have a bit of fun, give yer mother a wide berth sure.

"Such is the advice of Thady Malone," and my little friend drew himself up loftily, and spoke as one who had solved a hard problem.

"I followed the gentlemen right enough," he continued, "and never took my eyes off them, but kept on with them, eyeing and peering round, same as a hawk above a clutch of chickens. And by their talk I made out it was after specimens that they had come. I crept round by a bush, and discovered, right enough, it was after birds and eggs that they had journeyed; and at last one of 'em, the tall, dark, lean 'un, he called out to me, and he said to the fat, sandy-whiskered one that was standing by, 'Perhaps this lad could help us.' Then he turned to me. 'My lad,' he said, 'we want to go over a bit of wild country, and to see a bit of wild life. Take us to a wood that is known here as the Edge Wood. They say rare birds still nest there. Hawks, we've heard, some of the scarce tomtits, and one or two of the rare fly-catchers, and we want to get some eggs.' Said I to myself, 'Thady, yer shall have fine sport.' But one of them, the lean 'un, had a nasty stick, so I said, 'Thady, my man, be careful;' but comforted myself after a bit, for 'tis only on louts' backs that sticks need fall. Then I stood up and answered bold, 'Is it the big hawk that your honours want, or the fern owl, the sheriff-man, or any other fowl?' Begorra, and indade yer leddyship, there was no fowl that I wouldn't have pretended acquaintanceship with. And they nodded, and I nodded, and they, the fat and the lean, they winked, and I winked, and they talked of eggs and fine prices,

and they offered me shillin's, beautiful silver shillin's; but I said I'd serve them for the pleasure, for though silver is good, a bit antic is better. Besides," added Thady, gallantly, "what her leddyship has taught me, I canna unlearn," and Thady bowed to me with the instinct of a born courtier.

"So I started at a trot," pursued Thady, "and I sang out, 'Gentlemen, I'm yer man,' and I gave a bow and then away, as hard as I could make the pace, and they followed on, like two mad bullocks, or fox-hounds in full cry, and away we tore, over the fields, up the lanes, along the high-road where need be. On, on, I headed 'em like a young he-goat. I'm allus in training, and they followed. I gave 'em a splendid lead over field and fallow, and whenever the fat 'un panted bad, I told 'im to cheer up, for the fern owl and the great hawk's nests were just ahead.

"At last they began to get a bit rusty. Like enough, by the twinkle of my eye, they began to fear as their cases would never get filled. So I shouted out, as if I were leading the king's army. 'Keep up your peckers, misters, a field more and yer'll see the great hawk hisself,' and so on up a sharpish pull. I looked back, and saw 'em fair sick—the lean one coming on, but the fat sandy 'un fit to burst. I stopped to catch the breeze, and in the pause I shouted out, 'Yer'll find the nest with old Bolas, or where folks says the crows fly at nights,' and I laughed; and then, begorra, I ran like the best Jack-hare that ever I set eyes on. And when they guessed I had had a bit of a spree, they didn't take it kindly, not at all, at all, but called out no end of bad words—words," said Thady, sanctimoniously, "that I never could repeat in your leddyship's hearing, and that shocked even poor me. So I kept at a proper distance, for the

stick that the lean gent had was a right nasty one, and," added Thady, "a wise man only stops to argue with men of his own size. But I did hear they went up to the station that evening, those two poor gentlemen with never an egg or a grub in their cases, and the porter did say that they made tracks to Manchester like two bears with sore heads. 'Tis wonderful how some folks can never see a joke."

"Few of us can do that when the joke goes against us," I answered laughing. "But I am glad, Thady, that you played them a trick. Naturalists of that sort are a pest. In the name of science, they rob our woods, and exterminate all our rare birds and butterflies. Every honest man's hand should be against them."

At this Thady grinned all over, "Indade," he said, "I'll remember yer leddyship's words of wisdom to my dying day, and never let go by a chance of honest amusement."

So speaking we reached the old Abbey Farmery. Hals and Bess, drowsy from their long expedition, were lifted off the pony half asleep. We all had a standing meal, which, as Bess said, was much better than sitting down, because you never eat what you don't want; and then the young life vanished—Bess and my little guest to bed, and Thady into the silent fields, and only Mouse was left to keep me company. I agreed that evening with the children, that it is very nice sometimes to have no dinner, and to return to simple habits, because the sense so of wood and field lingers longer with you.

CHAPTER VII

JULY

“As late each flower that sweetest blows,
I plucked the garden’s pride ;
Within the petals of a rose,
A sleeping love I spied.”

COLERIDGE.

I WANDERED round the garden some ten days later. It was July, the Queen of Summer in the North. I heard the swish of the mowers’ scythes, as wave after wave of blossoming grass fell beneath their feet. As I looked, I noticed that the trees had taken a darker, fuller shade of green, and that the apple and emerald tints which delighted me so much in budding June, had fled before the fierce days of full summer heat. Although the lawns were still verdant, and such as you could only see where the summer rainfall is great, all traces of spring were gone. The polyanthus and cowslips’ umbels were crowned with seeds, and the narcissi in the grass had almost vanished. Birds, that a few weeks ago were funny little fluffy creatures, with orange, gaping throats, were now strong on the wing. Tramp and Tartar pursued one day a thrush across the lawn. I ran out of the house to save him, but found, to my relief, that he could take good care of himself. With a triumphant scream he flew to the

top of the high yew hedge. In vain the two little terriers leapt and whimpered below, and besought him to come down and be killed. For all he was young, he was wise, and continued to sit on a twig, and to look down on their efforts with complacent indifference.

When I went into the walled garden, I found the moss roses in full blossom. They are most beautiful, the most delicate, perhaps, of all the roses. There was an old-fashioned pink, such as one used to see at Covent Garden Market years ago.

I had in my row *Blanche Moreau*, an exquisite paper white, *Maître Saisons*, another beautiful white, and the crested and deep purple *Deuil de Paul Fontaine*. How delicious they all were! Just a little sticky, perhaps, but very sweet; especially an old cottage pink variety that I was given from a garden at Harley, and the name of which I have never known. The kind donor, an old dame, I remember, told me, when she gave me a cutting and I pressed for the name, that it hadn't no name as far as she knew, but that she called it her "double sweetness," for it was to her nose, she affirmed, "honey and candy in one."

Then I noted, bursting into bloom on the other side of the path, rows of Chinese *Delphiniums* of all colours, that *Burbidge* had raised from some seed sent to me from a lovely Scotch garden in the far north. The blossoms were of all colours. There were some of an exquisite watery tender turquoise blue, some deep blue *de Marie*, and others, a faint and celestial tint, as of the sky on soft February days. Besides these there were opal twilights, and darkest indigos.

I paused and looked down the *Ercal* gravel path, and stood gazing at my forests of peonies. The English ones were over, but round the clematises were masses

of the Chinese sorts. They were of all colours—crimson, carmine, white, purple, cream, pink, rose. How wonderfully beautiful they were, what satiny pinks, what splendid roses, what creamy whites!

In the borders I noticed a few plants of the beautiful tree or Moutan peony, the most glorious kind of all, but which had flowered rather earlier. My plants as yet were small, but "Elisabeth" had had one blossom of deepest scarlet. And I was led to hope that Athlete, Comte de Flandres, and Lambertiana would be strong enough next year to be allowed to flower.

A few steps beyond I paused to look at my Austrian briar hedge, which was then literally, a line of flame in my garden. It was a glorious note of colour, and planted next to the hedge were patches of purple peonies. What a beautiful contrast the two made! one that Sandro Botticelli loved. Then I made my way to a bed of hybrid teas.

These delightful roses, as has been justly said, combine all that is best of old and new. Almost all of them are sweet scented, and even in cold latitudes they flower twice, freely, in each year. Amongst those that I love best are Augustine Guinoiseau, and Camoens. Beyond these, on the southern side of the garden, extend my great bed of hybrid perpetuals, which stand our cold Shropshire climate so bravely and bloom often into late November. I stopped to admire a beautiful specimen of the Earl of Dufferin that seemed almost purple in its sombre magnificence, and felt almost dazzled at the splendour of Éclair. Then I paused to smell a Fisher Holmes, and gathered an almost black rose, which Burbidge told me a few days ago was a new rose to him, and was called the Black Prince. Such a mysterious black rose as it was, with a faint

sweet distant smell, like new-mown grass after a summer shower.

Between each row of roses I have planted rows of the beautiful English and Spanish irises in turns. These bulbs, I find, like the damp and shade caused by the neighbourhood of the bushes, and the effect of yellow, purple, blue, and lavender, between the pink, red, and white of the roses was enchantingly beautiful. Then I looked upwards and was delighted to see that my Crimson Ramblers and Ayrshire and Penzance briars were all ramping away to my, and to their, hearts' content over their pillars, and covering their bowers and arches with trails and clusters of glory. I call my arches and bowers my garden in the clouds. Nobody quite knows how beautiful the Crimson Rambler can be till they have seen it against a background of summer sky. Just out of the garden stretched the plantation of firs, Scotch and Austrian, with a border of ribes, laurels, hollies, and yews. The plantation is very small, but it gives a sense of silence between the Abbey and the old town.

Before I returned to the house, I made my way to my bed of annuals. They were on the southern side of the greengages. How gay and gorgeous they looked with a few orange-tip butterflies flying over them. There were patches of African marigold, all a blaze of rich velvety gold, pale Love-in-the-Mist, sea-tinted and mysterious. Love-in-the-Mist is just such a flower as one can imagine Venus wore when she appeared for the first time from the depth of the sea foam, with its curious shadow of green, and its sea-green petals of blue. Then I had in full flower little square beds of larkspur, raised from some wonderful seed I bought from Messrs. Smith, of Worcester, that

had blossomed forth in a hundred shades of opalescent beauty. There were shadowy unreal reds, and purples of many shades and colours in one flower, and as I looked at them, they recalled the wonderful draperies of some Burne Jones figures in that great artist's paintings from the *Idylls of the King*. A little further off there were lines of stocks of all colours, warm-tinted buff, like the hue of Scotch cattle browsing on a moorland, primrose, bluish rose, dusky red, and spotless white, with creamy hearts. Then flame-coloured nasturtiums ran along in places, black and brown, and twisted and twined wherever there was a little space. At the end of the long border there were patches of the primrose-tinted sweet sultan, with its exquisite scent, mixed with crimson cockscomb, over which old Gerard fell into ecstasies, and wrote of the "gentle," as he called it, that it "far exceeded his skill to describe so beautiful, and excellent a plant."

Before I returned to the Abbey, I slipped off to the kitchen garden to ascertain what progress my sweet peas had made. They were only as yet showing buds and long tendrils, but in another month they would be a glory of sweetness and brilliancy, I felt certain. As I retraced my steps to the Abbey, I was greeted by the children. During his visit to the Abbey little Hals had lost his delicate look, and fine pink roses bloomed on each cheek. He and Bess came dancing up the path hand-in-hand, and the little fox-terriers scampered behind them, joyously.

"I am sure we have found something," cried Bess, excitedly. "Burbidge wouldn't look because he's been stung by a bee. 'But,' I said, 'you don't hear all that chattering for nothing. If only Thady were here we should soon know.' I wanted to run off to the Bull

Ring to fetch him, but Nana said I wasn't to mess myself, as Aunt Constance was coming down to luncheon to-day. Much she'd care! She knows I can have as much soap as I like."

"Much you'd use, miss, if you had your own way," I answered laughing. And then I turned and begged Bess, pouting and looking rather irate, to show me where there was this wonderful chattering.

"It is a secret," cried Bess, "I am sure—a real secret."

Then, without another word, we turned in through the wooden door at the back of the great yew hedge. As we entered I heard such a twittering and indignant chirping, that I was thoroughly puzzled to guess the cause. The children and I peered through the branches.

"There must be a cat somewhere," I said. I have read that birds will chatter round a sick cat or dying fox, but I could discover no beast about. At our approach, two brilliant greenfinches alone took flight with a beautiful flash of apple-green wings, and vanished into the recesses of the great walnut tree.

Still the harsh discordant cries continued. Suddenly I saw a nest.

"A nest!" I cried, "and the noise comes from there. What can it be?" I tried to touch it, but the nest of moss and twigs was beyond my reach. "We must get the steps and then we shall know what makes the noise," I said. "But only Mouse amongst the dogs may see; Tramp and Tartar must be shut up in the shed, for if the birds fluttered down or could not fly, they would kill them, before we could save them."

We shut up the terriers and fetched the steps. "I wish," I said, "that one of the boys"—as Burbidge

calls them—"were here to hold them." For the ground at the back of the hedge was uneven, and it was difficult to get the steps reared firmly up.

"I'll hold them, dear," said Hals, politely. And added with pride, "You know I'm very good at doing any man's job."

But as they were heavy and rather clumsy, being an old-fashioned pair, I declined this and begged Hals to get out of the way, for fear of an accident happening to him. Then I mounted. I reached the summit of the ladder and looked down into the nest. As I did so I was conscious, at the "back of my head," as Nana says, that the children were watching me intently.

"What is it?" they cried breathlessly.

I saw below me a greenfinch's nest made out of green moss and twigs and lined with cow's hair, and in it, filling almost the entire space, was a gigantic grey-barred bird with an enormous mouth, which he opened at me in great wrath. Nothing daunted, I stretched out my hand to seize him, and obtained my prize; but in the effort, of doing so, I overbalanced myself, the steps clattered down with a crash, and I fell, bird in hand, to the ground.

In my endeavour to save the bird from harm, I came in contact with a projecting piece of lime rock. I felt a sharp pain in my right knee, and then a giddy, confused sensation possessed me, and a hundred lights, red, blue, and white, danced before my eyes. The bird escaped from my hand and fluttered into the hedge with a guttural cry. Hals and Bess approached me in terror.

"Mum, Mum, you're not dead?" asked Bess. I saw the little face twitching above me, and as she spoke, hot tears ran down her cheeks.

"No, no," I whispered dreamily; and then all the

trees and the hedge seemed to mingle in a senseless dance, and everything bobbed up and down before me. But I did not entirely lose consciousness, for I heard the children whisper together. At last Bess took Hals' hand and came quite close to where I was lying.

"They do not always die," Hals said soothingly.

"No, not mothers," Bess answered, with a gulp. But my poor little maid looked white with fear—she was trembling, and added, "But mothers *can* die."

I tried to say something to reassure them, but all my words seemed to die on my lips, and as I lay there everything seemed to get further and further off, and to become indistinct and unreal.

At last Hals seemed to remember what to do in the emergency. "Run, Bess, run, and get some one," I heard him say.

As the two children started off to the house, Mouse gave a whimper, and I felt her rough, kind tongue against my face. Then a mist gathered round me and I remembered nothing more.

In a little while, however, I heard voices. Kindly Auguste led the way, talking volubly. "Madame est morte," I heard him call out in theatrical tones. Then old Mrs. Langdale followed, wringing her hands; then Célestine, like a whirlwind; and Nana and Burbidge a second later hobbled up across the lawn.

"Madame, vite," exclaimed Célestine, and then followed a string of proposed remedies in the most astonishingly quick French. As she spoke, she tried to raise me, but I could not move without acute pain; and Mouse, watching my face, growled angrily. At this, Burbidge forced himself to the front.

"Have done with your gibberish," he cried, in a surly tone. "For an English blow an English remedy. Yer

might have broken my steps, marm," he said to me, with a catch in his throat. Burbidge is full of kindness; "but at times his tongue is as rough as pig bristles," as his old wife, Hester says, and just then he was thoroughly angry with me for having hurt myself chasing "mere wild birds, like a village loseller."

Then he called to his boys, and somehow, with their aid, I got back to the house. The children were both in tears.

"She has broken her leg," cried Bess. "Mothers can, I know it, besides beggars and princes."

But Hals would not allow this, and said, with dogged steadfastness, "Mothers don't break like dolls, I know that."

For this remark Burbidge commended him. "Stick to it, young squire," he said; and then he bade Roderick run for the doctor, like greased lightning.

After a minute or two, Nana begged all to go out, and took possession of the injured knee, and began to bathe it with a decoction of arnica and boiled lily-root, which last is an excellent remedy, still used in Shropshire, for cuts or bruises. Gradually the pain diminished, and as I lay, feeling much shaken and a little foolish, the doctor made his appearance.

He begged me to remain on the sofa, to rest, and discontinue all exercise for the present; and before going wrote out the prescription for another lotion. When he had left, I weakly suggested I would use both, and hoped for the best. But this "trimming" course did not pacify Nana, who declared "he might say what he liked, but Dr. Browne had no call to change her lotion."

After luncheon I felt better, and was carried out on a sofa to the lawn on the east side of the house, some favourite books were placed near me, and the letters I

had received that morning. Burbidge was by that time very penitent and full of compunction, now that he was no longer terrified, and was sure that my leg was not broken. He brought me a sprig of lavender, "to have summat nice to sniff," and assured me "that them birds of mine in the aviary should be looked after proper;" and added, by way of gloomy consolation, "I wouldn't let 'em nohow suffer, not even if you'd broken both legs."

When Burbidge had left me, I took up my letters sadly, and felt grieved that I must forego that week the pleasure of calling on friends and of visiting their lovely gardens, decked in the full glory of summer; and that I could not see, as I had intended to do, the stately garden of Cundover, the glowing borders of Burwarton, or the splendour of the Crimson Rambler at Benthall. All these beautiful things, as far as I was concerned, must remain unseen, and flower their sweetness away in the desert air.

Not even my own garden might I visit, for my orders were to lie down and not to put foot to the ground for some days; so I said sadly to myself I must only *think* of gardens. I remained therefore quite quiet, for the children had both gone off to tea at the Red House, and Mouse, and I were left alone, to enjoy each other's society.

I lay back amongst the cushions, and thought of all the beautiful gardens that I had ever seen.

My mind flew back to the old Hampshire garden, where I had played as a child, with its glowing anemones in May, its auriculas, and its golden patches of alyssum, which we called as children, "golden tuft." Its great hedges of lavender, its masses of fruit trees, and its big beds of hautbois strawberries all returned to me. How well I remembered the quinces, medlars, and mulberries, and a hundred other delights. I recollected

also, the groves of filberts and great coverts of gooseberries and raspberries, where the old gardener used to allow us to "forage," as he termed it, for ten minutes at a time, and never more, by his great silver watch, presented to him years ago "by the earl," in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Then how beautiful the walls were in summer and autumn, laden with apricots, peaches, delicious black figs, and later on, with beautiful pears of brilliant colours and gigantic proportions.

How carefully the fruit trees were trained—some in toasting-forks and others to make perfect fans. And then what beautiful long alleys of close-shorn turf there were, and what plantations of beautiful standard roses he grew for my mother.

Then my mind flew back to the beautiful pleasaunces of Highclere, just seven miles away. How magnificent were the great cedars round the house, the masses of gorgeous rhododendrons, and the wonderful beds of azaleas. Then, amidst shady groves with sparkling patches of sunlight, I remembered, also, beautiful examples of the great tree or Moutan peony—the highest and biggest bushes that I have ever seen; and across the park, delicious Milford, with its islands of blossom, its swans, and its sunlit lake. Gardens are great pleasures. The state gardens of the world remain with us as beautiful and wonderful pictures of the tastes and manners of past centuries. They are the living splendours of past ages. I recalled such examples as Levens, Hatfield, Longleat, and Littlecote. Then I turned in thought to homelier, what Bess calls, "more your own kind of places;" and I thought of the lovely little old manor-house gardens that I had seen. There is one not far from Wenlock, by name Shipton. A

little terraced garden, with old stone vases of Elizabethan time. The present house dates mostly from Mary Tudor's reign, and belonged later to Sir Christopher Hatton, the Maiden Queen's dancing Chancellor, who won all hearts by his grace and amiability, it is said. On each side of the little narrow garden run high walls, festooned with roses—and such old-fashioned roses! Old kinds that I have never seen elsewhere—such as Waller might have thought of when he penned his exquisite verses to Saccharissa—dainty, small, and deliciously fragrant. Then, just outside the garden are big bushes of brilliant berberries, that turn in autumn, red, like a regiment of English soldiers in peace-time, and that were so highly esteemed for the making of “conserves,” in the Middle Ages.

How pretty such old-fashioned gardens are—very tiny, very dainty, and meant to be very formal and trim. They seem little worlds all of their own; little centres of human care and affection, and outside all appears a wilderness in comparison.

Then, as I lay idly back, looking into the blue mist and enjoying the far green of the poplars, my mind turned to all the lovely gardens that I had read about. I thought of “that railit garden,” that James I. of Scotland—poet, musician, and artist—loved; and where he fell in love with the Lady Jane, the fair daughter of the Earl of Somerset. There, he tells us, he passed his deadly life—“full of peyne and penance.” From a grim tower he first saw his lady-love. He tells us in the “King's Quhair,” how he saw her walking in a fair garden, and how, in seeing her, “it sent the blude of all my body to my hert;” and how, for ever afterwards, “his heart became her thrall,” although “there was no token of menace in her face.”

There, amidst "a garden fair," by towered walls, knit round with hawthorn hedges, where thick boughs beshaded long alleys, and where the sweet green juniper gave out its aromatic fragrance, he, poor poet-king, sang of love, listening all the while to the "little sweet nightingale that sat on small green twists, and that sang 'now soft, now lowd,' till all the garden and the walls rung 'right of the song.'"

Then I thought of that still garden at St. Mary's chapel, at Westminster, where the great father of English poetry wrote his treatise on the "Astrolabe" for his little son Lewis. I imagined him with his wise and tender face, and far-off, deep-set grey eyes looking out on the world kindly, serious, gentle.

I liked to remember the great man's peaceful death-bed, and thought of his last sweet verses—

"Flie fro the prese, and dwell with sothfastnesse ;
Suffise unto thy Goode, though it be small,
For horde hath hate, and climbing tikelnesse."

It is an old, old story, and yet always a new one; but in Chaucer's time, failure met with a sharp ending.

I thought also of that fair garden near the Temple, which our greatest poet has touched with the divine intuition of genius, and made bloom with roses that no frost can kill, or smoke can soil. Where Plantagenet plucked the white rose of York, and Somerset the red one of Lancaster.

Then I thought of unfortunate Richard's queen in the garden at Langley, and of the old faithful, rugged gardener and of his bitter cry of pity. "Here did she drop a tear. Here in this place I'll set a bank of rue, sour herb of grace."

Then I thought of Lord Bacon's beautiful garden of

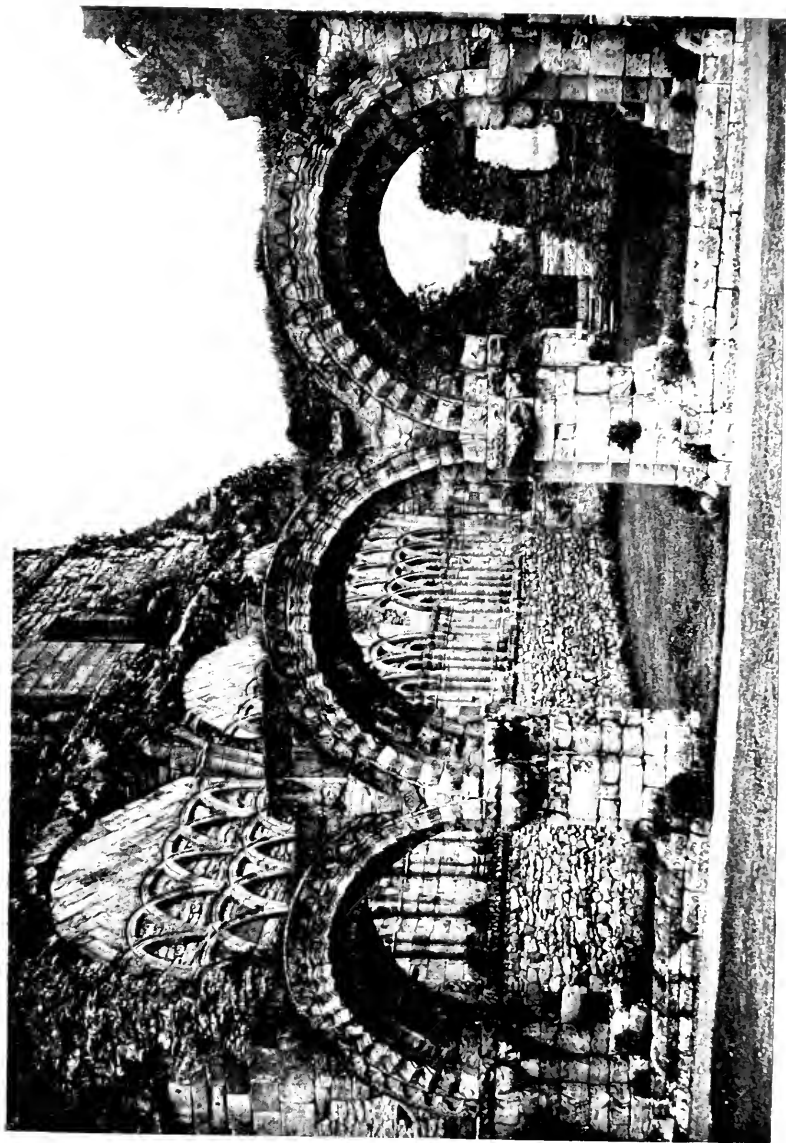


Photo by Frith.

CHAPTER HOUSE AT WENLOCK.

"prince-like" proportions. According to him, the ideal garden did not measure less than thirty acres, and was to be divided into three parts—a garden proper, a greene, a heath, or desert.

In the garden there was to be a succession of flowers. Germander, sweet briars, and gilly flowers, were some of those named, and the garden was always to be gay. He advocated many kinds of fruit, "cherries, rasps, apples, pears, plummes, grapes, and also peaches."

In the heath or desert, were to be planted thickets of honeysuckle, and garlands of wild vine; while mole-hills were to be skilfully covered with wild thyme, with pinks, and in opening glades, sheets of violets, cowslips, daisies, and beare-foot, were each to have their place. Then long alleys were to be planted with burnet, wild thyme, and water-mint, which, when crushed, would, he tells us, "give out rich perfume."

"Great Princes may add statues and such things for state and magnificence," wrote Bacon; "but beyond these things is the true pleasure of a garden." And there the great Chancellor was right, for we all know little plots and tiny greenhouses, worked and tended by loving hands, where the owner, and toiler, gets more pleasure out of a very small enclosure or a single frame, than a ducal proprietor out of many acres of horticultural magnificence. God is very just in pleasure, if not in wealth.

It was in his own beautiful garden at Gorhambury, that the great philosopher and master-mind wrote much that was beautiful. His was a strange character. He soared to heaven by his intellect, and fell to hell by his baseness. Ben Johnson wrote, "In his adversity I ever prayed that God would give him strength, for greatness he could not want."

Bacon, be it said in sorrow, was one of the last of

the bench who descended to torturing his victims. He wrote of the unfortunate Peacham, when he refused to answer his questions, "that he had a dumb devil." Yet this man loved at other moments pure pleasures. His love of a garden was real, and deep, and no man understood more fully the heights and depths of the Christian Faith, or the higher flights of redeemed souls. "Prosperity," he wrote, "is the blessing of the Old Testament; Adversity, the blessing of the New, which carrieth the greater benediction, and the clearer evidence of God's favour." "Prosperity," he declared, "was not without many fears and distastes, and Adversity not without comforts and hopes. Prosperity doth best discover vice, but Adversity doth best discover virtue." Nobody has ever approached Bacon for his beauty of expression. Shelley wrote of his style, "His language has a sweet, majestic rhythm, which satisfies the sense no less than the almost superhuman wisdom of his philosophy satisfies the intellect." Such natures as Lord Verulam's are difficult for commonplace mortals to understand, for the head is of a god, and the feet, those of a beast. The young or inexperienced might call such men humbugs, or hypocrites; but, perhaps, the real truth is, that such men possess dual natures. In them is a spirit that knows the light, and seeks it, as the Chancellor swore he would seek the light; but to whom, also, the ways of darkness are not repellent, and who cannot resist the favour of man, and the false glamour of courts.

Then I thought of the fair gardens of history. I imagined the splendours of Nonsuch, laid out by bluff Harry, of which men said, "that the palace was encumbered with parks full of deer, and surrounded with delicious gardens and groves, ornamented with

trellis works and cabinets of verdure, so that it seemed a place pitched upon by Pleasure herself, to dwell in along with Youth."

It was also good to think of John Evelyn in his plantings, and during his long rides. I thought of him journeying in the south of France, along the Mediterranean coast, enjoying the sight there of the vineyards and olives. In fancy I beheld him scenting the orange and citron groves, and stopping to gaze "at the myrtle, pomegranates, and the like sweet plantations," as he passed villa after villa, built, as he said, of glittering free-stone, which, in that clear atmosphere, made him think "of snow dropped from the clouds, amongst the verdure of the ilexes and perennial greens."

Besides these fair gardens, I thought in the dawn of gardening, of Elizabeth of York's bower, "in the little park of Wyndsor," and I liked to dream of that arbour in Baynarde's Castle in London put up for her, by order of the king. I should have liked also to have walked with Sir Thomas More in that fair garden (probably his) from which he imagined the one in his "Utopia," where "we went and sat down on a green bank and entertained one another in discourse."

Then I should have liked to have crept into the great gardens at Hampton Court laid out by the great cardinal, where "there was a flower garden to supply the queen's bower with roses, and where John Chapman, the most famous gardener of his time, grew his herbs for the king's table."

I should have liked to have had the invisible cap, and to have stepped past the guard and entered the Privy garden, and have read the mottoes on the sundials, and to have slyly scented the roses, and pinched the rosemary, juniper, and lavender.

Had I possessed the magic cap, I should not have forgotten to wander into the Bird garden and to have seen "the beestes," holding in stone their vanes; and I should have liked also dearly to have seen all the strange animals, amongst which there were harts, badgers, hounds, dragons, antelopes, and one stately lion.

Could I have walked there, perhaps I might have caught a glance of that "sweetest lady from Spain" whom Shakespeare honoured most of all women; or perhaps in the joyous hey-day of her youth have met Anne of the slender neck, for whom Fate had reserved so terrible a fate, although for a time all seemed to go so smilingly with her.

Then I should have liked to have been a favourite guest at Moor Park, in the days when the stately Countess of Bedford lived there, and to have heard the wits talk, and perhaps have followed the countess and Doctor Donne up the trim gravel walks, and have admired the standard laurels, and rejoiced in the stately fountains in a garden that, in the words of the great Minister of the Hague, "was too pleasant ever to forget." I should have liked also to have walked into Sir William Temple's own garden at Sheen, had a chat with him about his melons, of which he was so proud, or have paced with him the trim alleys of his own Moor Park in Surrey. Later, I should have liked to have seen his stiff beds, reflections of the *parterres* of Holland, and have heard from his own lips the account of the Triple Alliance. And beyond this garden of men's hands, I should like to have seen the glorious extent of firs and heather that enclosed his garden, and to have heard the murmur of the distant rivulet, and to have felt the charm of the distant view that he gazed upon.

Perhaps even, if fortune had been kind, I might have seen Lady Gifford in all the splendour of silk or satin, or heard some brilliant witticism from the lips of young Jonathan, or even have caught a fleeting glimpse of lovely Stella.

Now all these pretty, all these interesting shades of the past are gone. Yet Sir William's sundial still stands in his favourite garden, and below it lies buried his heart, placed there by his own desire, whilst the rest of his remains lie in Westminster Abbey, beside those of his charming wife, Dorothy Osborne.

No sound anywhere, on this lovely July day, greeted me, but the trilling jubilation of a thrush in a lilac, so I could dream on at will about gardens and their delights. After a while my mind wandered to the gardens of the ancients. I thought of those deep groves where Epicurus walked and talked, of the rose-laden bowers where Semiramis feasted and reposed, of the moonlit gardens where Solomon sung his Oriental rhapsodies, where fountains played day and night, and in which hundreds of trees flowered and fruited.

Where were the gardens of "the Hesperides?" I asked myself. That spot of wonderful delight which none ever wished to leave, where flowers blossomed all the year, and where fair nymphs danced and sang through all the seasons.

Then where was the garden of Alcinous, where the trees formed a dark and impenetrable shade, where fountains refreshed the weary and where fruit followed fruits in endless succession?

With us in England, a garden means a place of joyous sunlight, a place where flowers glitter in the sunshine, and where throughout the day feathered songsters sing in joyous chorus. In the Oriental

imagination, a garden means cool alleys, flowing water, marble basins; a place to wander in beneath the stars, and to hear the nightingale sing his chant of melody and grief. Even in the matter of gardens, the aspirations of the West must always be different from those of the East. Then my mind turned to the gardens of fancy.

"Where sprang the violet and the periwinkle rich of hue"—where "all the ground was poudred as if it had been peynt, and where every flower cast up a good savour." Where amongst the trees "birdis sang with voices like unto the choir of angels, where sported also little conyes, the dreadful roo, the buck, the hert, and hynde, and squirrels, and bestes small of gentil kynde." Where sweet musicians played, and where, as Chaucer wrote, with the *naïveté* of the early poets, that God who is Maker and Lord of all good things, he guessed, never heard sweeter music, "where soft winds blew, making sweet murmurs in the green trees, whilst scents of every holsom spice, and grass were wafted in the breeze."

Then in the peace of that exquisite summer day, I saw as in a dream that blest region which Sir Philip Sidney has painted and called Arcadia, "where the morning did strew roses and violets in the heavenly floor against the coming of the sun, where nightingales sung their wrong-caused sorrow;" where the hills rose, their proud heights garnished with stately trees, beneath which silver streams murmured softly amidst meadows enamelled with all sorts of eye-pleasing flowers. Where pretty lambs with bleating outcry craved their dam's comfort, and where a shepherd-boy piped as though he never could grow old, whilst a shepherdess sang and knitted all the while, so that it seemed "that the voice comforted her hands to work, and the hands kept time to the voice music."

In that sweet and happy country, where light and sun and blue sky were constant joys, where the houses were all scattered, "but not from mutual succour," where the joys of "accompanable solitariness were to be found combined with the pleasures of civil wildness," I allowed my fancy to linger.

Then as butterflies flitted past in all the pomp of summer splendour in my Abbey garden, I thought for a moment of Mistress Tuggy's bowers of passion-flower at Westminster, of which Gerard wrote, and of which he told us "there was always good plenty." I thought also of that gay procession to the Parson of Tittershall, where merry maids went, bearing with them garlands of red roses, and of that wreath laid through many centuries, in beautiful Tong Church.

I liked to imagine Theobalds, where it was said a man might wander two miles and yet never come to the end of the great gardens; or to think of that great pleasaunce of Frederick, Duke of Würzburg, where it was said that it was easy for a stranger to lose his way, so vast was the space of the enclosure.

Then I should have liked to have known the great gardens of Kenilworth, where proud Dudley entertained the Maiden Queen.

There, according to Master Humphrey Martin, every fruit tree had its place. In the centre of the pleasaunce stood, he wrote, an aviary and a fountain of white marble, where tench, bream, and carp, eel and perch "all did play pleasantly," and "beside which delicious fruits, cherries, strawberries, might be eaten from the stalk."

In the Elizabethan garden men were not content with gay blossoms alone; sweet odours were necessary to complete their standard of delight.

Bacon wrote, because the breath of flowers is "farr

sweeter in the air, where it comes, and goes, like the warbling of music, then in the hand, so there is nothing more fit for delight than to know what be the flowers and plants that doe best perfume the aire." He recommended amongst other sweet scents, two specially, that of violets, and the perfume of dying strawberry leaves, "an excellent cordial in autumn." He also mentioned the perfume of sweet-briar, and recommended that wall-flowers should be planted under a parlour or lower chamber window.

Andrew Borde, writing in the same century, declared that it was deemed necessary for the country house of his time to be surrounded by orchards well-filled with sundry fruits and commodious, and to have a fair garden "repleat with herbs aromatic and redolent of savours."

Markham also talked of the nosegay garden, which was to be planted with violets, and gilly-flowers, marigolds, lilies, daffodils, hyacinths, "tulipas," narcissus, and the like. There were to be knots, or *parterres* of delightful interlacing patterns, and amongst the ribbon borders such sweet plants and flowers as thyme, pinks, gilly-flowers, and thrift, all neatly bordered and edged, with turrets and arbours to repose in.

Thomas Hill, writing in 1568, also suggested that there should be *parterres* filled with hyssop, thyme, and lavender, for the pleasure of the perfume. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries folks sought their flowers in their gardens, which it can well be imagined was a much healthier form of enjoyment than the modern one of masses of flowers in stuffy rooms and of having tables laden with strong-smelling blossoms, during hot and crowded banquets.

The delight in the garden was essentially a sixteenth and seventeenth century pride. Lawson exclaimed,

"What can your eye desire to see, your ear to hear, your mouth to taste, or your nose to smell, that is not to be had in a garden, with abundance of beauty?"

Lawson also loved the birds, as did the Scotch poet king, and Chaucer, and, in the early nineteenth century, Shelley and Keats. He wrote lovingly of a brood of nightingales that turned his orchard into a paradise. "The voice of the cock bird," he declared, "did bear him company, both day and night."

Then I should have liked to have visited Gerard in his physic garden in Holborn, overlooking the Fleet, and how delightful it would have been to have had a chat with the old man, or to have brought him some new plant or flower.

Or perhaps, if fortune had smiled upon me, I might another day have popped in and got a talk with John Tradescant, whose father and grandfather were both gardeners to Queen Bess, and who himself was gardener in his time, to ill-fated Charles I. These Tradescants travelled all over the world in search of plants for the royal gardens, and one of them even went to Virginia in order to bring back new specimens.

Where are the gardens of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? A few are the delight and joy of our own time, but most of them have perished, and are gone like the roses that Sir Philip Sidney picked for Stella, or the anemones that John Evelyn loved. The press of human feet has displaced nearly all the fair floral sites in London, and the hare and the partridges rove over many of those famed in Tudor and Stuart days in the country.

Of Nonsuch, Evelyn wrote, "they cut down the fair elms and defaced the stateliest seat that his Majesty possessed."

Alone, near High Ercall, at Eyton, where George Herbert's mother was born and bred, stands the old gazebo or pleasure-house that belonged to the ancient hall of the Newports. This still remains in red brick, a lovely sixteenth-century building. The old house has perished, and the old gardens have gone back into plough, or meadow-land. Alone the old pleasure-house stands and a gigantic ilex, which is said to have been planted at the same time.

Did "holy Mr. Herbert" ever pace that old pleasure-house, I have often asked myself, as a little lad? It is a pleasant thought. All loved him. Lord Pembroke, his kinsman, told the king, James I., that he loved him more for his learning and virtues than even for his name and his family, and all men sought his friendship. Amongst these the learned Bishop of Winchester and Francis Lord Bacon. Was it of such a man that the great essayist wrote, "A man having such a friend hath two lives in his desires"? If so, it was of the immortal side of life he spoke, for all George's aspirations were for the treasure where "neither moth nor rust can corrupt, and where no thief can break through or steal."

Then I let my fancy linger for a moment in the old bowling-green at Whitehall, all gone too; I thought of the prisoner, Sir Richard Fanshawe, in the chamber above: and of his devoted wife, standing morning after morning, whilst the rain fell in torrents, talking and listening with the desperation of love.

The shadows deepened, the sunlight faded, and the glory of red melted away into tender lavender and green. After a while I think I got drowsy, for in my imagination I saw a garden, gorgeous and resplendent. Loud music resounded within its precincts, and a pleasaunce extended before me of strange and fantastic beauty. In

the centre I noted a beautiful fountain, reared on four columns of silver, with four golden masked faces, from whose lips clear water issued in sparkling streams. There were also curious beasts of gold and silver, in the shape of lions and unicorns.

The magic garden was hedged in with a sombre hedge of cypress. On the whole scene fell the brilliant glare of flaming torches. Gorgeous *parterres* of tulips, all a blaze of blossom, flashed with a hundred colours, whilst to me, borne on little eddying breezes, came wafted back the delicious sweetness of honeysuckle and eglantine. Then, as I looked, to the sound of lutes and to the tinkle of old stringed instruments, I saw nymphs clad in rich apparel dance a stately measure.

My book slipped off my knees, and fell with a flump upon the grass. A minute later I rubbed my eyes and laughed, and then remembered that I had not been to fairyland after all, as Bess would have said, but that I had fallen asleep, and had been dreaming about the Masque of Flowers, a great *fête* that was given in honour of the marriage of the Earl of Somerset and the Lady Frances, daughter of the Earl of Suffolk, by the gentlemen of Grays Inn, in the long past year of 1613. I laughed, for I really believed, as the children say, it was all true, and Mouse, suspicious probably by my puzzled look, gave a long deep growl. My faithful friend had never left my side. Since my accident she had remained with me, troubled, and annoyed and sullen to everybody else.

Mouse had a bad opinion of the doctor (most dogs have). She did not like his carriage, and thought badly of his coachman. Just then the world for her was full of evil characters, and they taxed narrowly her powers of observation.

As I leant over the sofa to pick up my book, the oak door of the chapel hall was flung violently open, and the two children, Bess and little Hals, danced in together.

"Oh, mamsie!" they cried, for Hals had caught up Bess's manner of addressing me. "Such fun! such fun! We did all kinds of things. We played games in the garden—Kiss in the Ring, Stag a Roaring, Bell Horses, Draw Buckets, and Shrewsbury Blind Man's Buff, Wall-flowers, Garden Jumps, and heaps of others. Aunty Constance called them 'Shropshire games.'"

"Were they good games?" I asked.

The children were too excited to speak, but nodded their heads furiously, whilst their eyes shone with excitement.

"Can you repeat to me any of the rhymes?" I asked.

"Hals can," answered Bess; "I can't long remember poetry. Things fly into my head, but they soon fly out again."

I turned to Hals, and begged him to tell me those that he could remember.

"Well," he replied, "I'll try. Anyway it was great fun. Aunty Constance taught us a lot, but most of the children came from her class, and, besides, they knew a lot. Shropshire children, I think, even Fräulein would call 'very learned.'"

"They were all funny," cried Bess; "and we danced on the grass, and Aunty Constance gave us sugar-plums, and red lolly-pops between the games, and we drank lemonade and orangeade."

"Yes," said Hals, grandly; "I don't think even the king, or my father could have amused themselves better. They know how to be happy in Shropshire."



Photo by Frith.

OLD WENLOCK TOWN.

Then Bess interrupted Hals and called out sharply, "Amuse mama."

"Do," I said; "and begin by telling me all about the games, and repeat to me all the rhymes that you can remember."

"Yes, we must," said Bess, moved to pity, "for poor mama, she didn't even go to Auntie Constance's garden, although she was asked, or see Auntie Constance's new flower with a long name that I am sure I can only misremember."

There was a pause. Then Hals stood on the gravel path some five yards away, and said modestly, "I'll do my best, but I am afraid all the games won't come back to me. The first time you play at games, they are almost as hard as sums."

"Oh no," interrupted Bess, contemptuously. "Games can never be as bad as sums, for you can kick about and swing your feet in games. But in sums it's always 'keep quiet;' and then," added Bess sadly, with a note of pathos in her voice, "sums will always keep on changing, unless they are done by a governess."

Then a hush fell upon us all, for Hals said he must try and think of the games pat, and we were silent. I saw Hals' lips move, and a pretty vision rose before me of a little figure clad in green velvet, with fair flaxen curls clustering round his brow and resting on his lace collar. After a few minutes the little boy stepped a little nearer, and in a treble key, began to explain the character of the old games and to recite some of the old verses that once delighted lad and lass of the far West country.

"First we played Kiss in the Ring. We ran about," he explained, "and the boys dropped handkerchiefs on

the shoulders of the girls they liked, and they said in turn—

“‘I wrote a letter to my love
And on the way I lost it;
Some one has picked it up,
Not you, not you, not you.’

That they said,” said Hals, “when the boys didn’t like a girl. I didn’t play,” he remarked grandly, “because I didn’t like being kissed by strange girls; so I played with the others at Cat and Mouse, which is better, for the kissing is understood.”

“And after that?” I asked.

“Oh, after that we played Bingo.”

“Bobby Bingo,” corrected Bess, severely. “You should call things by their proper name, Hals.”

“It was a game about a dog, and we came up, and all said together,” continued Hals unmoved—

“‘A farmer’s dog lay on the floor,
And Bingo was his name O.
B-I-N-G-O, B-I-N-G-O,
And Bingo was his name O.’

I cannot exactly say how that was played,” said Hals, puzzled, “but we danced and we sang, and one girl stood straight up in the middle, as if she had a punishment lesson to say. And when I’m grown up, I will get my father to buy me a dog, and I will call him Bingo.”

“Now I want to talk,” cried Bess, impatiently, “because I, too, know some of the games. We’ve often played at them, Nana and I and the maids, on Saturday afternoon when it was wet. There was Bell-horses. Nobody is so silly, mamsie, unless it’s members of parliament or governesses, as not to know ‘Bell-horses.’”

Then my little maid slipped off the wooden bench on

which she had been swinging her feet, and went and stood by little Harry.

"Listen," she cried, and blurted forth at double quick pace—

"Bell-horses, bell-horses, what time of day?
One o'clock, two o'clock, three and away.
Bell-horses, bell-horses what time of day?
Two o'clock, three o'clock, four and away."

Then we stood up, and cried out—

"Five o'clock, six o'clock, no time to stay."

At this point Hals came and sat quietly by me on the edge of my sofa, and Bess went on.

"Besides that we had Green Gravel, Green Gravel, and even Mrs. Burbidge says that is not a wicked game to play," cried Bess; and repeated the old lines with a funny little tilt of her head—

"Green gravel, green gravel, the grass is so green,
She is the fairest young lady as ever was seen.
I'll wash her in milk,
And I'll clothe her in silk,
And I'll write down her name
With a gold pen and ink."

Then came what Bess called "them that laughed," who said—

"O Sally, O Sally, your true love is dead,
He sent you a letter to turn round your head."

"I like that," remarked Bess. "The words are pretty. 'Green gravel, green gravel,' but I shouldn't like to be washed in milk, soap and water are bad enough, but I should like letters to be written with a pen of gold. They sound as if they ought to be letters all about

holidays or Christmas presents; leastways, they never ought to be rude or disagreeable, or have anything to do with lessons.'

"Yes," agreed Harry, "written only for fun, and because everybody may do as they like."

Then we discussed Wallflowers. And as the children stood talking, for Hals had run to Bess's side, old Nana came out of the Chapel Hall and joined our group.

"It is time, mam, for them to be in bed," said Nana, sourly; "and I'm sure it will be a mercy if both childer are not ill to-morrow. By their own accounts they've eaten as many lolly-pops as they had a mind to. I did think as Mrs. Legarde had more sense than that. But them as feasts children, should physic 'em."

"Wallflowers, wallflowers," interrupted Bess, rudely. "Come and amuse mama, poor mamsie hasn't had tea out, or done anything to please herself."

So old Nana—whose bark, all the household acknowledges, is far worse than her bite—came and began to recite the old rhymes of her youth, and of the old days before that.

"I am just ashamed of the old nonsense," she said, blushing like a girl, "but since it will amuse your mama," and she turned to Bess, "I'll try my best." And Nana, in a funny old husky voice, with the Shropshire accent growing stronger and stronger at every line repeated—

"Wallflowers, wallflowers, wallflowers up so high,
Us shall all be maidens, and so us will die.
Excepting Alice Gittens—she is the youngest flower,
She can hop, and she can skip, and she can play the hour,
Three and four, and four and five,
Turn your back to the wall side.'"

And thereupon old Nana, animated by old recollections, turned her back upon me and stood facing the old bowling-green.

"Well done!" cried both children simultaneously. And then Bess called for "Nuts in May." "You know, what we played last Christmas, when we could'nt go out," she explained, "because the snow was so deep."

For a moment Nana looked puzzled.

"You ought to recollect that," cried Bess, "because it was you that learnt us it before."

Nana thought for a minute, and then repeated the old Shropshire version of the ancient game, which, tradition says, was written by Queen Bess one Christmas time for Lord Burleigh's children. But Nana first of all explained to us the action of the game.

"You must know, mam," she said, "that there are two parties—one of lads and the other of lasses." "The first come up and call (the lads)—"

"Here we come gathering nuts in May,
Nuts in May, nuts in May,
Here we come gathering nuts in May
On a cold and frosty morning."

"Then the second lot," as Nana called the lasses, "answer back, and shout—"

"Who have ye come to gather away?"

And the first lot (the lads) reply—

"We have come to gather sweet Maude away.'
'And who will you send to fetch her away?'
'We'll send Corney Rodgers to fetch her away.'

"Then the two parties pull," she added, "and in the end a lass has to leave, and to go over to the lads' side."

"Who was sweet Maude, and who was Corney Rodgers?" I asked of Nana.

But she declared she didn't know for certain, "but most-like he was some bad bold man who lived in the hills, and took off any maid he had a mind to."

"Go on, go on!" cried the children enthusiastically, and clapped Nana vociferously.

"You know them all," exclaimed Bess, "although you like pretending; but nurses always do."

At this Nana, for all her head of snow, fell a laughing. She forgot all about "bedtime," and stood before us with pink cheeks, whilst she exclaimed—

"They comes back! They comes back, the old plays." And therewith begins to repeat "Here comes Three Dukes a Riding." "Us used to play that—and a right pretty game it was," she explained,—“on the village green, when the leaves were budding, betwixt the hours of school.”

And she recited aloud in her dear, funny, old cracked voice—

“ ‘Here comes three dukes a riding
With a ransome, dansome, day.’ ”

"Then the lasses used to answer," she told us, "and cry out—

“ ‘And what is your intent, sirs, intent, sirs?
With a ransome, dansome, day.’ ”

"At this the lads used to shout—

“ ‘My intent is to marry, to marry.’ ”

"And the maids would reply—

“ ‘Will you marry one of my daughters, one of my daughters?

"Then the lads used to look highty-tighty, for all they had in their bones only the making of ploughmen,

ditchers, and shepherds," Nana declared, "and they would say—

" 'You be as stiff as pokers, as pokers.'

And turn up their noses and strut back.

"Then the maids would answer, mincing like—

" 'We can bend like you, sirs, like you, sirs!'

"Then the lads would scan the lasses up and down, and sing back, as if every one of 'em had been born a lord, or high sheriff of the county at least—

" 'You're all too black and too blowsy, too blowsy
For a dilly-dally officer.'

"Then the maids would sing with a bit of spite—

" 'We're good enough for you, sirs, good enough for you.'

"Then a lad would leave his fellows, and say with a shrug of his shoulders, and crestfallen like—

" 'If I must have one I will have this,
So away with you my pretty miss.'

And then old Nana told us that the maids would laugh and the lads would jeer, for in turn each lad had to choose a lass, and sometimes the lass he had a mind to wouldn't go.

Then Nana, after a short pause, said, "Then there be another game as us used to play. Ring of Roses, some used to call it, and others Grandfather's Rheum. But I cannot remember but one verse—

" 'A ring, a ring of roses,
A pocket full of posies.
One for Jack, and one for Jan
And one for little Moses.
A-tisha, a-tisha, a-tisha.'

and the fun was who could sneeze loudest. I remember Mike Mallard and Mary Wilston was wonderful at it. 'Yer'll die in a sneeze,' folk used to tell them."

"Nana can you think of no more, just one more." For Nana had beckoned to Bess to say good night and go.

"Yes," I said, "just one more."

So old Nana yielded to our united pleadings, asserted it must be only *one*, as it was high time for her lad and lass to be in bed, and ended by reciting aloud a strange old Shropshire rhyme—

" ' Walking up the green grass,
A dust, a frust, a dust.
We want a pretty maid
To walk along with us. '

"The lads used to say that in a chorus," Nana explained. "Then the maids would answer—

" ' Fiddle faddle—fiddle faddle. '

"Then the boys would say—

" ' We'll take a pretty maid,
We'll catch her by the hand,
She shall go to Derby,
For Derby be her land.
She shall have a duck, my dear,
She shall have a lamb,
Hers shall be a nice young man,
A-fighting for her sake.

" ' Suppose this young man was to die,
And leave the lass alone,
Our bells would ring, and we should sing
And clap our hands together. '

"And the maids said—

" ' Fiddle faddle—fiddle faddle. '

"I don't like it," said Bess, impulsively. "Why should they all be jolly because the poor gentleman died?"

But Hals did not take that view. "There's things," he said loftily, "as girls can't understand."

At this Bess turned very red, and in the spirit of the modern woman declared, "What she couldn't understand, Hals couldn't neither." And in deep dudgeon she followed Nana into the house.

As the little party passed out of the garden Hals called back to me, "We've forgotten Stag a Roaring. The best of all the games we've not told you about. One that I played last year with my papa at a school feast."

The twilight turned into night. The servants came out, and I was helped back to the Chapel Hall. After all it had not been a dull afternoon. One can go many miles in one's room, if one knows how to ride on the wings of fancy, and many is the garden that I had visited that day, borne along on the pinions of imagination, for were not the gardens of all time open to me? No dragons or mailed warriors guarded the entrance gates, not even a modern policeman.

An hour after dinner I found myself in bed. The window of my chamber was wide open, an old lancet window of Norman days, one out of which Roger de Montgomery may have gazed, and, later, many of the Henry's of England in succession. All was very still outside. In the little bit of dark sapphire-blue sky that met my eye as I lay in bed, I saw a mist of silver stars, and the scent of the creepers entered with entrancing sweetness. I was no longer in pain, but not sleepy, so I stretched out my hand and took hold of a book. My hand closed upon a volume of Milton, well

worn, and much used ; for John Milton has a solemn, sacred power, and touches you with the solemnity of some grand chords heard upon a cathedral organ, and the melody of his verse is often welcome in this holy place. But it was not to his "Paradise Lost" or "Regained" that I turned, nor to his exquisite sonnets. I was in a lighter mood ; I turned to the most beautiful masque that ever was written ; whilst I thought of the most beautiful of all ruins, Ludlow Castle, the early home of Sir Philip Sidney, England's ideal knight, and the mirror of her chivalry.

The plot of the masque arose from a simple little mishap which happened in the life of the actors. John Milton was then tutor to the Earl of Bridgewater's sons, Lord Brackley and Thomas Egerton. On their way to Ludlow, the young party went through Haywood Forest in Herefordshire. Travelling with her brothers was the Lady Alice Egerton. Somehow, in the depth of the wilderness, the young lady was lost for a short time.

Out of this slender plot Milton constructed his masque of "Comus." His friend, Henry Lawes, set his songs to music, and the fair Alice and her two brothers all appeared in the play on Michaelmas night and acted at Ludlow Castle before their parents and assembled guests. As I lay in bed the grace and the charm of the masque returned to me. I thought in the tranquillity of the summer evening I heard the lady calling—

"Sweet Echo, sweetest nymph, that lives unseen
Within thy airy shell,
By slow meander's margin green,
And in the violet-embroidered vale
Where the love-lorn nightingale
Nightly to thee her sad song mourneth well :

Canst thou not tell me of a gentle pair
That liketh thy narcissus are?
O, if thou have
Hid them in some flowery cave
Tell me where?
Sweet queen of parley, daughter of the sphere,
So mayest thou be translated to the skies
And give resounding grace to all heaven's harmonies."

How prettily the lines must have sounded, not through wood and glade, but through the stately presence chamber of Ludlow Castle to the graceful tinkling music Lawes had written for them. The earl and countess sat, I have read, in all the state of the Marches Court in the front row, and were surrounded by neighbours and dependents. There is the grace of great things in "Comus," and a grace and finished purity of soul that have seldom belonged to youth.

The elder brother's speech is worthy of Shakespeare—

"He that has light within his own clear breast,
May sit in the centre and enjoy bright day.
But he, that hides a dark soul and foul thoughts,
Benighted walks under the mid-day sun;
Himself is his own dungeon."

What happened to fair Alice, I have often asked myself, in the time of trouble that was soon to come? I have never been able to find out much, save that she married Lord Carberry, and lived with him at his seat of Golden Grove.

In the unbroken calm, the old world seemed very near me. Ghosts, once dear to Ludlow, seemed to breathe around me. The little princes, with their fair curls, smiled upon me from the threshold of life; Prince Arthur, Sir Philip Sidney, Alice and her brothers, and Milton in the dawn of his poet's career; ill-fated Charles;

and brilliant, but broken-hearted, Butler. I thought of all of them, whilst the wind stirred faintly the summer leaves. At last I sank into repose. Sweet dreams are those suggested by old-world ghosts, and when the spirit is lulled by the graces of another age. I lay half-dreaming, half-awake, and thought of John Milton, young and beautiful, with the fire of inspiration in his deep grey-blue eyes. A man of wonderful learning and grace. A master swordsman, inasmuch as it was true of him "that he was not afraid of resenting an affront from any man." Of deep erudition, for Hebrew, Chaldee, and Syriac were all known to him, besides being well versed in Italian, French, and Spanish. He could repeat aloud, I have heard, many portions of Homer. I thought of him later giving himself up to the delights of music, of which he was a master, as was his father; playing, it is said, both on the organ and on other instruments. He was also a composer, like his friend Henry Lawes, though none of his compositions have reached us. Certainly, as Bishop Newton wrote of him, "he was a man of great parts, for his was a quick apprehension, a sublime imagination, a strong memory, a piercing judgment, and a wit always ready."

The next day I sat out after breakfast. It was delicious weather. Soft rain had fallen during the night towards dawn, and refreshed the earth. I had begun to answer letters on a little bed-table, when my solitude was interrupted by the appearance of Auguste. He approached my couch with a profound bow. Under his arm was a book bound in vellum, and bearing on the side an inscription in manuscript. He advanced, placed both heels together, and then bowed profoundly.

"Madame se porte mieux?" he inquired.

I replied in the affirmative, and thanked him for his kind enquiries.

There was a pause; then Auguste bowed again, and after a long string of courteous words, in which our cook trusted that "le bon Dieu ferait vite son métier," and in which he assured me that he prayed that I should be soon restored to health, he put beside me "le cahier blanc" that he had been holding. "C'est l'œuvre de mon grand-père," he explained with pride. "Il était cuisinier dans la famille d'un maréchal de l'Empire," and added, "madame peut copier ce dont elle a besoin."

I felt overwhelmed at this proposal, for I realized that poor Auguste was giving me what he prized most in the world. Perhaps the great Napoleon had supped off grandpapa's *entrées*, or Josephine had tasted an ice or some *brioche* made by grandpapa's hands. These recipes have for Auguste the mysticism of the lore of Merlin. They are, in his words, *magnifiques, superbes*, and the last words of culinary art. "Mes secrets," he generally calls them. Grand'maman bound them in white vellum, and the book has been handed down as a priceless heirloom in Auguste's family.

I felt I could hardly thank my cook sufficiently for his kind thought. There Auguste stood in irreproachable white linen cap and coat. No prince could have believed that he could offer a more splendid gift, as he repeated, with a theatrical wave of his hand, "Madame peut tout copier." And then added, with an indulgent smile, "Madame est malade, cela lui fera un plaisir énorme."

I rose to the occasion and said, as "bonne ménagère." I found it difficult to express my gratitude.

At this Auguste retired a step, and then, with a courtly bow, exclaimed grandly, his eye upon my

embroidery which lay near on a chair, "It faut que les artistes se consolent dans les jours de tristesse," and so saying, vanished to reign over his own kingdom.

A little later Burbidge came in to see me. In his hand he held a bunch of roses, neatly tied with green matting, a new fad of mine. Amongst the roses that he had brought me, I found a lovely Caroline Testout, of great size and beauty, of a delicate pink with a glow of richer colour in the centre. Then there was an open bud of charming Thérèse Levet, and a full blown splendour of Archiduchesse Marie Immaculata, with its curious red-brick tints; and two or three blossoms of the dear old-fashioned Prince Camille de Rohan of a deep, brownish crimson hue.

"Here's a few on 'em, just a sprinklin'," said Burbidge. "But oh, 'tis a pity as yer can't see 'em growin'! The sop of rain has brought 'em out, like the sunshine brings out chickens from under a hen's wing. They be popping and peering in the garden, as if they had the Lord Almighty to look at 'em Hissself."

"Perhaps He is," I said with a smile.

To this Burbidge didn't give direct assent, but like a true Shropshire man, he declared that it was his belief, if the Lord was on earth, it might please Him to see the place, for the whole of the red-walled garden was a garland of flowers. "There be irises, and roses, and peonies; and it be hard to tell the colours. There be all sorts and all shades, most like a glass window in the Abbey Church at Shrewsbury." And Burbidge added, with that true sense of poetry that belongs to the peasant, that "the Wrekin doves they be cooing and fluttering round the firs, same as in a real poem."

Burbidge laid the bunch of roses close beside me, for they had slipped off the sofa whilst he was talking.

Before going, he vouchsafed the information that there be a Reine d'Angleterre three parts in blow. He pronounced the French words strangely, but I understood from many talks what was meant in Gallic, and that he would bring it to me. "And 'tis a great deal, I think, the sight of a new rose—leastways, 'tis to me; for it allus pleases, and it never can be uncivil like many Christians," he said. After which profound dictum, my good old gardener hobbled off. These kind gifts and little attentions touched me. I appreciated much Auguste's thoughtful kindness, and Burbidge's pity for my misfortune, for it was his invariable rule that a "first blow," must show itself first in a garden. "Don't 'e interfere with the Lord's system," he once said to me, when I wanted to gather a new tree peony. "Let it pleasure itself first time in the garden, and arter yer may please yerself."

I smelt my bunch of roses, the fragrance was delicious, soft and sweet, and only to be fully appreciated by dipping one's nose well into the centre of the sweetest.

Certainly a rose is a lovely flower, and it is wonderful what gardeners have done to tend, improve, and develop it, and it was hard to imagine that any of the great double complex blossoms that I held in my hand, were first cousin, and lineally descended from the wild rose of the hedges. Yet delicious as roses are, and beloved by most men, and women, there have been, and may be, for aught I know, some who still cordially hate them, as cordially as Lord Roberts is said to dislike the presence of a cat, or a certain Duchess that I have been told of, the approach of horses.

Marguerite of Navarre, the wife of Henry IV. of France, is said to have found the perfume of roses so repellent, that she fainted if one was brought her; and I remember in

Evelyn's Diary of 1670, an account of a dinner-party at Goring House, in which he tells us that, "Lord Stafford rose from table in some disorder, because there were roses stuck about the fruit at dessert."

Sir Kenelm Digby also told a story of the same kind of Lady Selenger (St. Leger). Her antipathy to this flower he declared to have been so great, that some one laying a rose beside her cheek when asleep, thereby caused a blister to rise. Whether the story was true it is too long ago to tell; but by all accounts Sir Kenelm "was a teller of strange things."

Whilst I was thinking over these old-world stories, I was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of my little girl.

"Oh, mamma," cried Bess, with tears in her eyes, "only to think he—Hals—has to go, to go in two days."

"Do not cry, little one," I replied. "Papa and I have settled that I am to go off for a week to the sea-side, and you shall come too; and even Mouse shall have her ticket."

At this Bess was comforted, for the prospect of the sea, the sands, and a spade of her very own, were very consolatory. But the day that little Hals left us, she came to me just before going off to bed.

"Mum," she said, "I've been thinking."

"Yes, dear," I replied.

"I've been thinking," pursued Bess, "that somehow there ought to be—a way to keep a boy. Grown-up girls have husbands, I know," she said. Then, after a momentary pause, "You have a great, great book of Harrod's. Surely, somewhere, mamsie, they have a boy stall."

I laughed and kissed my little girl. "We are poor creatures," I said, "we girls and women. We have all

for centuries wanted to buy some boy, and haven't yet found out where or how to do it."

A few days later, Bess and I found ourselves on the Wenlock station platform. Masses of boxes surrounded us, and Mouse, with a label tied to her collar, sat watching us intently.

"Why aren't you glad to go—glad as I am, mamsie?" cried Bess, impetuously. "You know the doctor said that it would make you quite better, and we can bathe together in the sea. Besides," added my little maid, with wisdom beyond her years, "if you only go, you are always much gladder to come back."

We jumped into a carriage, and Mouse looked out of the window. Burbidge took my last injunctions. Then the train moved off, and the ruins and old town of Wenlock faded before my eyes. "Good-bye, dear old place!" I murmured. And as we dashed on, faintly sounding on the breeze, I caught the last notes of the distant chimes—"Good-bye ! Good-bye !"



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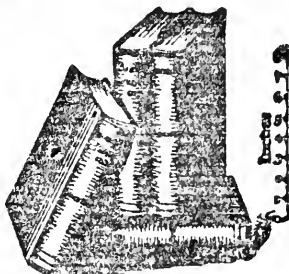
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